Basketball Preview 2022–23

THE FINAL FOURS
MEN UNC, Gonzaga, Houston, Kentucky
WOMEN South Carolina, Stanford, Texas, Iowa

MAN ON A MISSION

Sports Illustrated

NOVEMBER 2022
VOLUME 133 | NO. 10
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JEFFERY A. SALTER

Is the NBA Ready for ZION WILLIAMSON 2.0?

BY **HOWARD BECK**

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LINEUP

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READ HIS LIP . . . One look at Timme's facial hair lets you know you're dealing with the most interesting man in college basketball.

JAMES SNOOK/USA TODAY SPORTS

DEPARTMENTS ▸

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SCORECARD P. 14
FACES IN THE CROWD P. 24
POINT AFTER P. 112

New!

EGG BITES

NEW!
Jimmy Dean
Egg Bites
Meat Lovers
EGG, PORK SAUSAGE, BACON, HAM & CHEDDAR CHEESE
17g PROTEIN PER SERVING
2 BITES
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LINEUP

GREEN PARTY
The Celtics won Game 3 of the 2022 Finals at home (pictured) but lost their next two in Boston, allowing the Warriors to celebrate at the Garden.

BASKETBALL *Preview*

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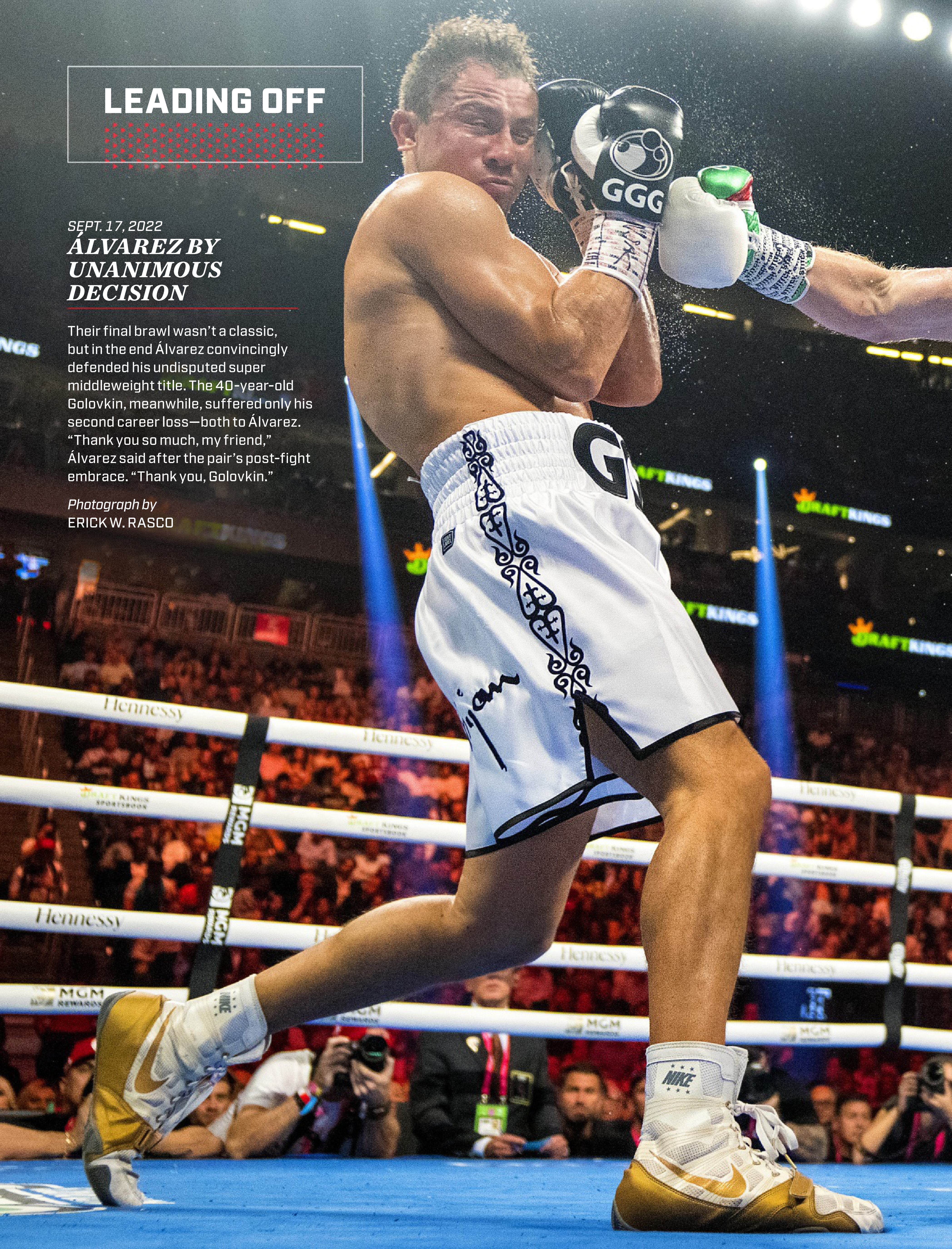
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (ISSN 0038-822X) IS PUBLISHED MONTHLY BY THE ARENA MEDIA BRANDS, LLC. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: 200 VESEY STREET, 24TH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10281-1008. OWNED BY ABG-SI LLC. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: 1411 BROADWAY, 21ST FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10018. PERIODICALS POSTAGE PAID AT NEW YORK, NY AND ADDITIONAL MAILING OFFICES. POSTMASTER: SEND ALL UAA TO CFS. (SEE DMM 707.4.12.5); NON-POSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: SEND ADDRESS CORRECTIONS TO SPORTS ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE, P.O. BOX 37576, BOONE, IA 50037-0508. U.S. SUBSCRIBERS: IF THE POSTAL SERVICE ALERTS US THAT YOUR MAGAZINE IS UNDELIVERABLE, WE HAVE NO FURTHER OBLIGATION UNLESS WE RECEIVE A CORRECTED ADDRESS WITHIN TWO YEARS. CANADA POST PUBLICATION MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 40624074. YOUR BANK MAY PROVIDE UPDATES TO THE CARD INFORMATION WE HAVE ON FILE. YOU MAY OPT OUT OF THIS SERVICE AT ANY TIME. MAILING LIST: WE MAKE A PORTION OF OUR MAILING LIST AVAILABLE TO REPUTABLE FIRMS. IF YOU WOULD PREFER THAT WE NOT INCLUDE YOUR NAME, PLEASE CALL OR WRITE US. © 2022 ABG-SI LLC, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRODUCTION IN WHOLE OR IN PART WITHOUT PERMISSION IS PROHIBITED. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF ABG-SI LLC. CUSTOMER SERVICE AND SUBSCRIPTIONS: FOR 24/7 SERVICE, PLEASE VISIT SI.COM/MY ACCOUNT. YOU CAN ALSO CALL 877-747-1045 OR WRITE SI AT P.O. BOX 37576, BOONE, IA 50037-0508.



GGG
GG
DRAFTKINGS
Hennessy
MGM REWARDS
NIKE

SEPT. 17, 2022

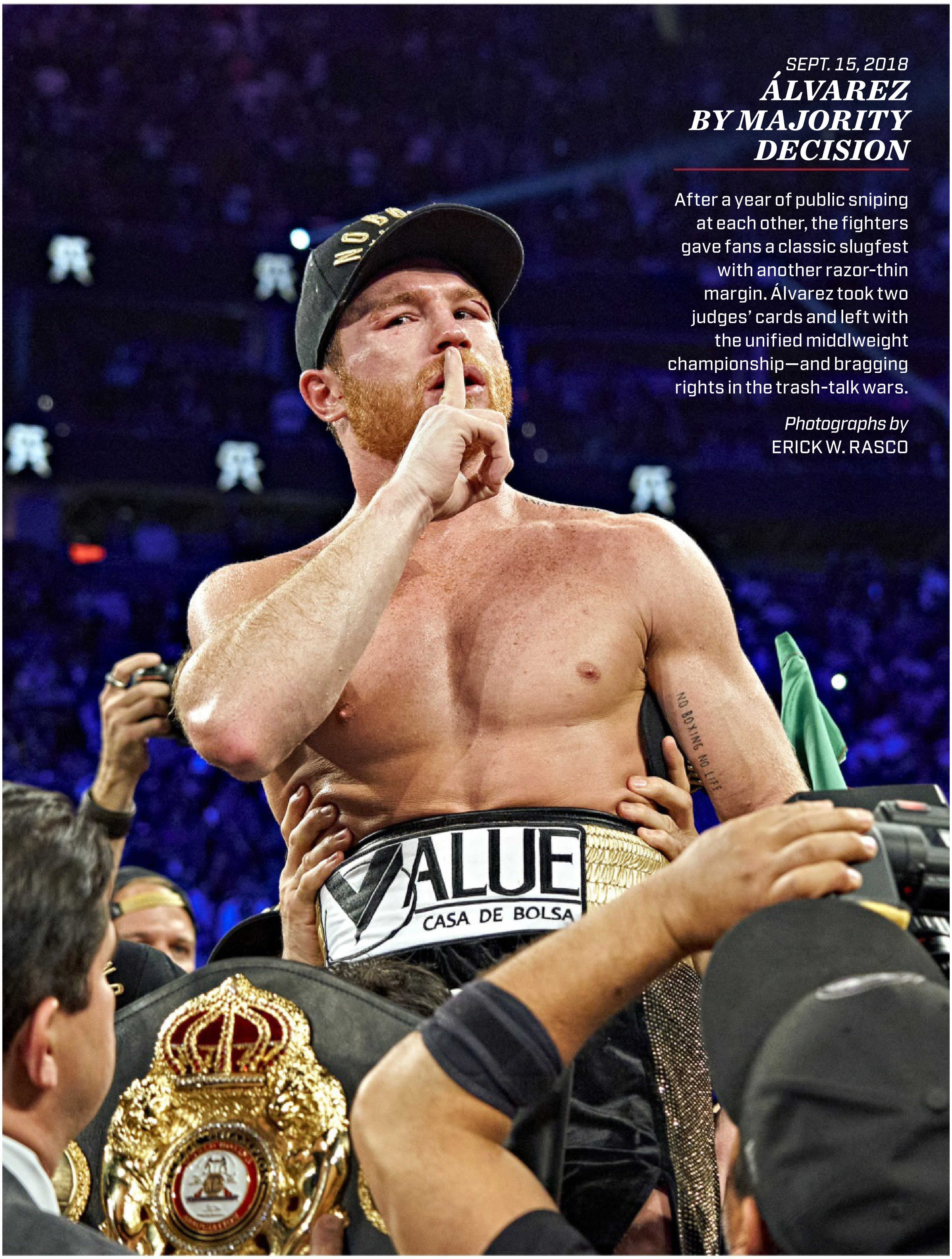
ÁLVAREZ BY UNANIMOUS DECISION

Their final brawl wasn't a classic, but in the end Álvarez convincingly defended his undisputed super middleweight title. The 40-year-old Golovkin, meanwhile, suffered only his second career loss—both to Álvarez. "Thank you so much, my friend," Álvarez said after the pair's post-fight embrace. "Thank you, Golovkin."

Photograph by
ERICK W. RASCO

RING TRILOGY

FIVE YEARS AFTER THEIR FIRST FIGHT—WHICH FEATURED ONE OF THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL OUTCOMES IN RECENT HISTORY—SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS **CANELO ÁLVAREZ** AND **GENNADY GOLOVKIN** CLOSED OUT ONE OF BOXING'S EPIC RIVALRIES WHEN ÁLVAREZ SCORED A RESOUNDING UNANIMOUS DECISION IN LAS VEGAS. THIS BEING BOXING, IT'S POSSIBLE THEY'LL FIGHT AGAIN SOME DAY. BUT ASSUMING THAT DOESN'T HAPPEN, THEIR THREE-BOUT PASSION PLAY HAS ALREADY GIVEN FANS EVERYTHING THEY LOVE ABOUT THE SPORT: SOARING DRAMA, CONTROVERSIAL ENDINGS, HEARTWARMING DISPLAYS OF SPORTSMANSHIP, UNREPENTANT TRASH-TALKING AND, ABOVE ALL, MOMENTS OF PURE PUGILISTIC ARTISTRY



SEPT. 15, 2018

ÁLVAREZ BY MAJORITY DECISION

After a year of public sniping at each other, the fighters gave fans a classic slugfest with another razor-thin margin. Álvarez took two judges' cards and left with the unified middlweight championship—and bragging rights in the trash-talk wars.

Photographs by
ERICK W. RASCO

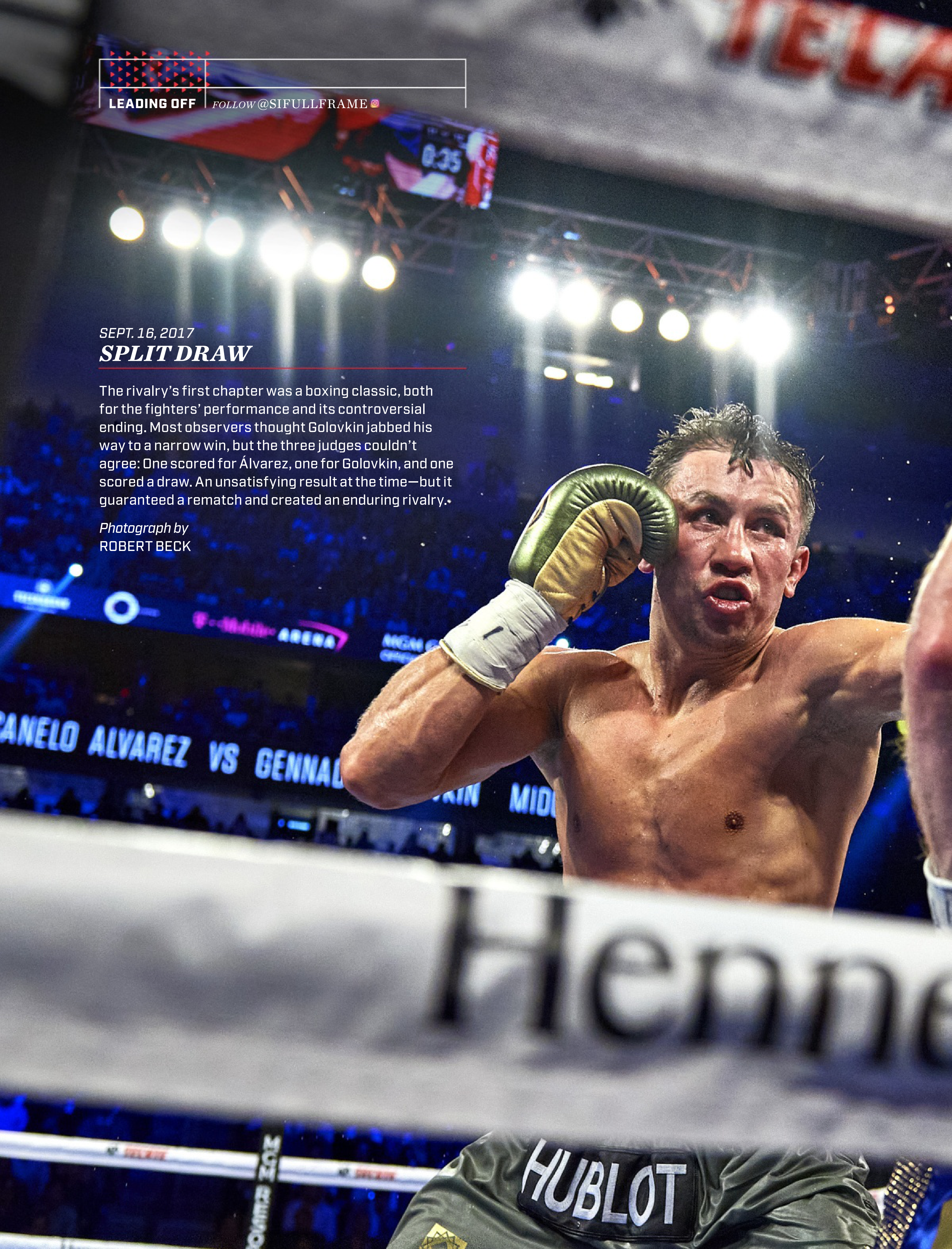
HBO B
AREZ VS GENNAD
12 ROUNDS
CANELO ALVAREZ
Hennessy
TECATE
MGM RESORTS
CAPITAL HOLDING
CANELO

SEPT. 16, 2017

SPLIT DRAW

The rivalry's first chapter was a boxing classic, both for the fighters' performance and its controversial ending. Most observers thought Golovkin jabbed his way to a narrow win, but the three judges couldn't agree: One scored for Álvarez, one for Golovkin, and one scored a draw. An unsatisfying result at the time—but it guaranteed a rematch and created an enduring rivalry.

Photograph by
ROBERT BECK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ANELO ALVAREZ VS GENNAD
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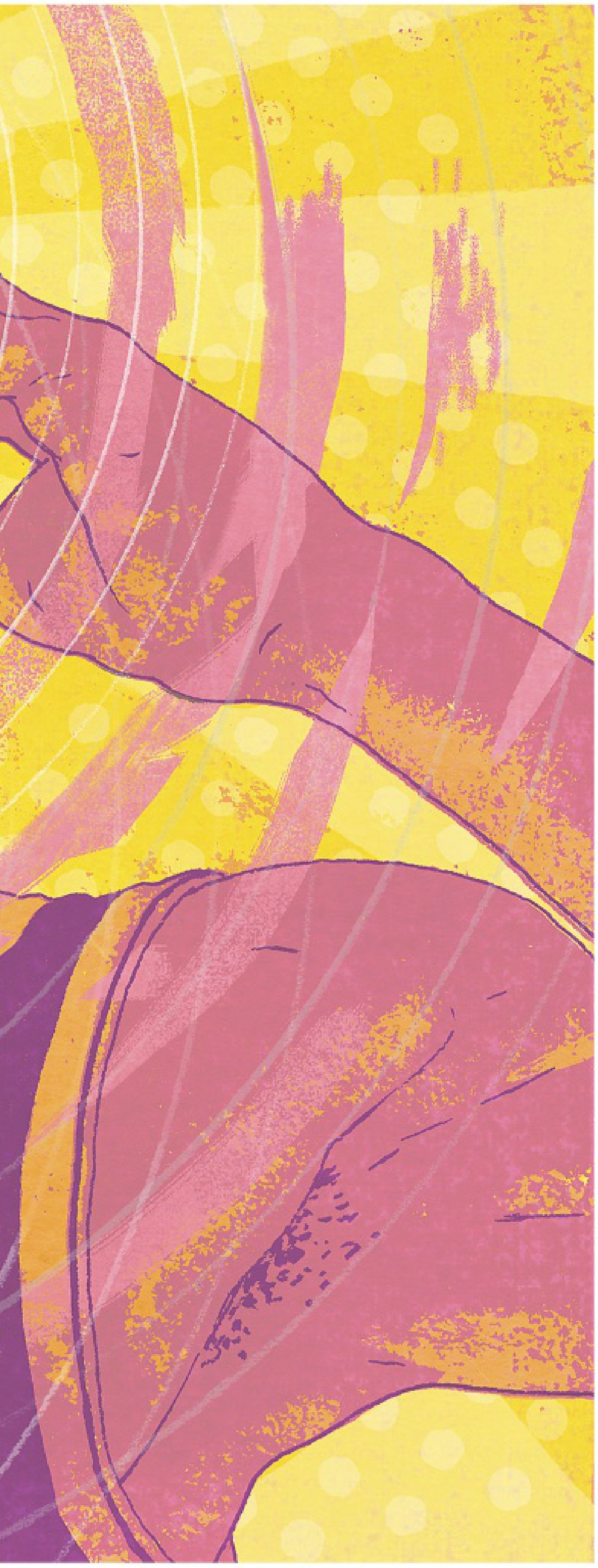
SCORECARD

NEWSMAKERS p. 18 | GAMEPLAN p. 20 | FULL FRAME p. 22 | FACES IN THE CROWD p. 24



MIND CONTROL

THE DEGREE TO WHICH STARS EXERT THEIR INFLUENCE OVER FRANCHISES RAISES A SIMPLE QUESTION: WHY WOULD ANYONE EVER WANT TO RUN AN NBA TEAM?

BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG
ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREW DEGRAFF

IN THE summer of 2019, Sean Marks told a joke that seems funny only three years later—and even then, it is not funny to him. Speaking to New York radio station WFAN after acquiring Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving, the Nets' general manager said that Durant had been drawn to the team's culture when he was with the Warriors. Durant, Marks said, told him: "I love the system. I love how you guys play. I see how hard you guys play. . . . You were never out of games. We could never take you guys lightly."

Meanwhile, Irving proceeded to spend the next three years relieving himself on the team's culture, at which point Marks decided he'd had enough. The Nets would reclaim their identity, he said. Durant responded by saying, "Great! But first, trade me." The Nets mumbled they would try, and maybe they did. But Brooklyn's asking price was so steep that any team acquiring Durant could not possibly contend for a title—which meant that he would probably just demand another trade.

Eventually, Durant agreed to stay in Brooklyn. Marks's statement on Twitter about it was hilariously and appropriately cosigned by Durant's media company, The Boardroom. If this saga somehow ends with the Nets winning a championship (still possible!), maybe Durant will let Marks serve him champagne.

This summer, a lot of words were devoted to whether Durant's trade request was justified. But debating whether he is right or wrong is like debating whether a grapefruit should have a rind. It doesn't matter. Durant is one of the best players in NBA history. His personality and insecurities are part of the package. If you want to eat the grapefruit,

JUAN OCAMPO/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

CLIP SERVICE
Leonard (right) wanted to be a Clipper only if the team did his bidding and got George as well.

you have to peel it; and if you want Kevin Durant on your team—as every team does and should—you have to build trust with him.

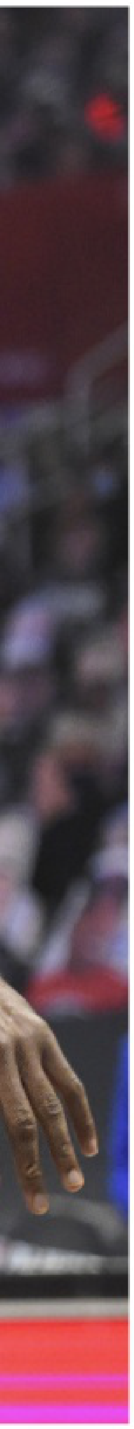
The difference between being the general manager of an NBA franchise and owning a fantasy team is you actually *control* your fantasy team. When GMs begin their careers, they envision themselves identifying talent in the draft, swinging smart trades and recognizing underappreciated value in free agency. By the time they settle into the role, the savvy ones realize that stuff is just a small fraction of the job. If they don't realize it, they risk having conversations like this:

"I am telling you to—"

"No."

"Oh, O.K. then."

The modern-day GM is part scout, part concierge. They must deal with players who think they're not playing enough—or, these days, who think they're playing too much. They must settle disputes among teammates and satisfy agents who push for trades. They have to decide which players are so unhappy that they need to go, and which ones are only sort of unhappy and can stick around. They have to manage crises when players say something



offensive and support the causes that their players champion.

When a star says he wants to play with a buddy, the GM has to decide whether to agree, disagree, acquiesce and sign the buddy, or persuade the star to change his mind. This comes up with almost every team in the league. Durant wanted both Irving and DeAndre Jordan, and he got them. Three years ago, Kawhi Leonard wouldn't sign with the Clippers unless they traded for Paul George, and so they did. (Leonard and George were not really buddies, but Leonard admired George's game.) The Lakers have done one deal after another with clients of Klutch Sports, which happens to represent LeBron James.

The GM must do all this without *completely* turning his franchise over to his stars. If an NBA team were a car, the GM would have his hands on the steering wheel, but his stars would have their feet on the pedals. The GM can choose a direction, but the stars decide whether they want to move.

IF AN NBA TEAM WERE A CAR, THE GENERAL MANAGER WOULD HAVE HIS HANDS ON THE STEERING WHEEL, BUT HIS STARS WOULD HAVE THEIR FEET ON THE PEDALS. THE GM CAN CHOOSE A DIRECTION, BUT THE STARS DECIDE WHETHER THEY WANT TO MOVE.

Franchises surrender themselves to their best players for the same reason that coaches complain to the refs: It can work. Not always. Not even most of the time. But look at the last decade-plus of champions, and what do you see?

The Heat won two titles after shedding almost their entire roster so that James and Chris Bosh could join Dwyane Wade. San Antonio ended Miami's reign, but eventually Spurs culture fought Kawhi Leonard, and Leonard won by knockout. The Raptors traded a loyal, beloved All-Star, DeMar DeRozan, for Leonard, and they won the championship. The Lakers are often mocked for turning their team over to James and his agent, Rich Paul, but whatever the Lakers did, it brought them a title in 2020.

The Warriors and Bucks are different in a sense: They drafted future MVPs and built champions around them. But their success reinforces the point that teams need stars—and stars are quite conscious of that.

It is easy to mock Marks's decisions now. But every GM in his position three years ago would have signed Durant and Irving. We can say that he should have signed only Durant, but that wasn't an option. We can say that Marks should have passed on Jordan, but at the time, how could he say no to Durant?

Durant was right about the Nets before he showed up: They did play hard and they were rarely out of games. Marks and then coach Kenny Atkinson built something pretty cool: a selfless, hard-nosed playoff team. But that team had no chance of winning a championship.

Marks's failure came after the initial Durant-Irving signings. He did not manage the egos—cajoling and inspiring and standing up to them when necessary, but only when necessary. Pat Riley, as the Heat's president, famously stood by coach Erik Spoelstra in James's early tumultuous days in Miami. Marks? He parted ways with Atkinson in March 2020. The problem, as Irving later explained: "We don't need somebody to come in and put their coaching philosophy on everything that we're doing." In other words, coaching.

Marks could not possibly have envisioned COVID-19 and the vaccine controversy that kept Irving off the court. But when the point guard decided not to get vaccinated, meaning he could not play home games, it was Marks's job to deal with it. Instead, the GM alternated between taking a hard line with Irving and pleasing him, and ultimately he did neither. He sacrificed the remains of his Nets culture for James Harden, perhaps the most catered-to star of this era—and when that blew up, he dealt Harden for Ben Simmons, another talented-but-unreliable star.

Sometimes, it seems like all the factors that used to lead to championships don't matter anymore: toughness, leadership, selflessness, astute team-building. But all those qualities matter just as much as they did 30 years ago. Teams just have to find different ways to instill them.

If you want to win an NBA championship, you need to acquire stars, and you need to make sure those stars believe in your vision.

This message has been cosigned by Kevin Durant.

NEWSMAKERS

NEW TRACK

WITH A PAIR OF DRIVERS IN THE NASCAR PLAYOFFS, AN UPSTART OUTFIT IS GETTING RESULTS—WHILE ATTEMPTING TO REDEFINE THE CONCEPT OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A STOCK CAR RACING TEAM

▸ BY MADELINE COLEMAN

COMMSCOPE
99
NASCAR CUP SERIES
FOX SPORTS
GOODYEAR
Freeway INSURANCE
RUCKUS
Coca-Cola

STEPHEN SPILLMAN/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK

EVERY NASCAR Cup Series champion since 2004, with the exception of one, has come from one of four teams: Joe Gibbs Racing, Team Penske, Hendrick Motorsports or Stewart-Haas Racing. “In racing, money wins, and money has always won,” says longtime driver Justin Marks. “And I think if you’re trying to tell a story that resonates with millions and millions of people around the world, the story can’t be, ‘This rich guy’s beating that rich guy.’ ”

Marks, 41, noticed that those four core teams had another thing in common: the way they were named. “They were all sort of the namesakes of very successful owners,” he says. “As a result of that, there just weren’t really any fans of teams. Fans follow drivers, they follow the sponsors, or the car maker or something like that.”

So in 2019 Marks got the idea to start a true team, one that fans would be loyal to. He enlisted Ty Norris, who helped build Dale Earnhardt Inc. in the 1990s. When NASCAR committed to its Next Gen car, which is designed to be less expensive and level the playing field, the barriers to entry were gone. They moved forward with their team, one that Marks says “represents what we believe the future of motor sports teams can be, and that’s truly a sports entertainment brand. An entity that tells compelling stories and unites a fan base and inspires people.”

They quickly got the house in order, leasing a charter from Spire Motorsports, forming a partnership with Richard Childress Racing for engine parts and aligning with a manufacturer, Chevrolet. They met with a brand team and came up with a name: Trackhouse. They didn’t want *racing* or *motor sports* in the name to avoid pigeonholing themselves. They got Pitbull (yes, that Pitbull) to come on as a part-owner.

The name Trackhouse worked on two levels. Says Norris, “*Track* can mean everything from dropping the needle on the record to . . . a track in motor sports. Then, *house* means home. A house can be a restaurant, a bar, an entertainment venue; [it] can be a race team.”

They wanted to own a color, opting for a bold, electric blue. For the logo, they combined the T and H with a recognizable slash, something Norris says “is to us like a Nike swoosh. That slash can end up anywhere.”

Marks and Norris of course knew that style could get them only so far. They needed drivers. At dinner one night, they were discussing options. “We need to be different, bold; we need to take that underdog role,” says Norris. One name that came up was Daniel Suárez *(above, left)*, a 30-year-old who was born in Mexico and learned English through cartoons. He won the Xfinity Series title in 2016 but struggled after making the jump to the Cup Series, bouncing around three teams

in four years. They texted him and later met in person. Suárez had other opportunities; on paper, it seemed like a no-brainer for him to go to a bigger team. Trackhouse, though, intended to build the team around him, creating a support system that Suárez longed for. “Once I got to Cup, I never felt like the organization or the team were listening to me,” Suárez says. “Sometimes, it’s way better to be a big dog in a small place than a small dog in a big place.” He raced full time for Trackhouse in ’21, finishing a season-best fourth on the dirt at Bristol.

During the season Trackhouse bought the racing assets of Chip Ganassi Racing, which allowed them to add a second car. It chose as its driver Ross Chastain, 29, an eighth-generation watermelon farmer from Florida who had also been racing for underfunded teams.

Chastain *(above, right)* got Trackhouse its first win at Austin in March. Suárez got his first career win at Sonoma in June. When the 16-car playoff field was set, 12 cars from the core four teams were in—but so were both Trackhouse drivers.

“We’re new, but this isn’t just a flash-in-the-pan moment for Trackhouse,” Chastain says. “I truly believe we’ll be here now for the long haul. I don’t view myself as an underdog anymore.” ◻

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (JAMES)

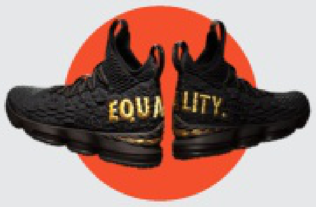
GEAR

A Foot Feat

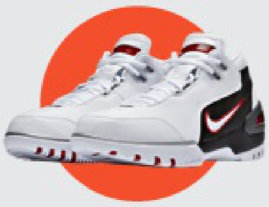
LEBRON JAMES is joining Michael Jordan as the only athletes in history with 20 signature sneakers. In 2003, Nike signed an 18-year-old James to the largest shoe contract at the time, worth $90 million, before he had played in an NBA game. James has since inked a lifetime deal reportedly worth $1 billion and received his own building at Nike headquarters.

James isn’t slowing down. The tag inside the tongue of the LeBron XX reads, “Built to the Exact Specifications of the Next Generation.” Says Jason Petrie, the lead designer of the LeBron line since the LeBron VII, “We took that line seriously as we designed the shoe. We saw the XX as a chance to celebrate the next 20 years for LeBron.” With that, here are a few of the King’s greatest hits. —*Jarrel Harris*

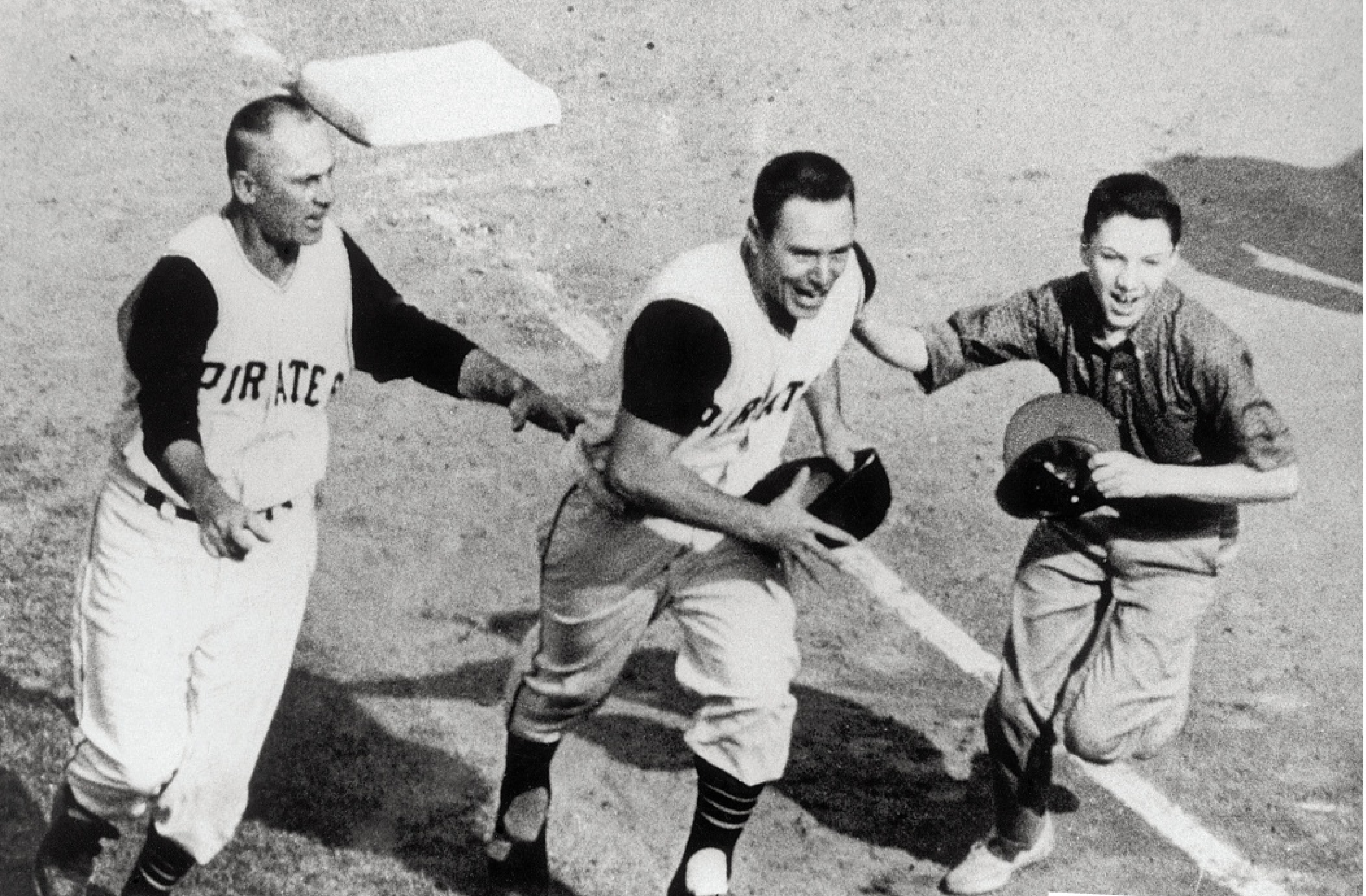
LEBRON VIII
James’s most coveted sneaker, and the first one he released after taking his talents from Cleveland to Miami in 2010 to become (for a time) the NBA’s biggest villain.



LEBRON XV
James donated the “Equality” colorway to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture.



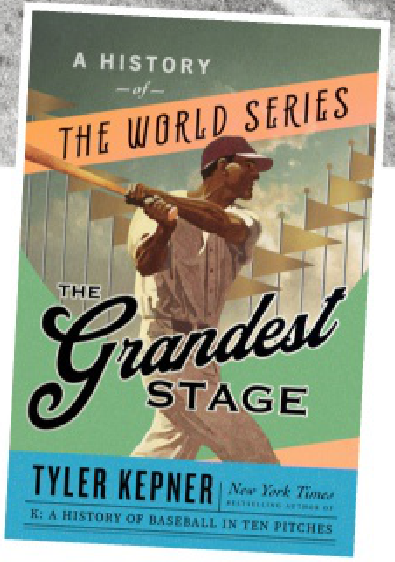
NIKE AIR ZOOM GENERATION
The sneaker that started off LeBron’s line took inspiration from his infamous Hummer H2.



GAMEPLAN: THE SMART FAN'S GUIDE TO RIGHT NOW

FALL GUYS

A FAMILIAR SUBJECT—THE HEROES AND GOATS OF THE WORLD SERIES—GETS AN ENTERTAINING, FRESH SPIN



READ

THE GRANDEST STAGE By Tyler Kepner

On Oct. 13, 1960, Pirates second baseman Bill Mazeroski hit a walk-off homer to win Game 7 of the World Series. The play has been written about ad nauseam but never quite like it is in *The Grandest Stage*, the new book from Tyler Kepner. The *New York Times* baseball writer dedicates a lengthy section of the book to explaining how the bigger story in Game 7 was actually the three-run shot hit an inning earlier by teammate Hal Smith, which—in terms of increasing a team's chances to win—is, Kepner shows, the biggest play in World Series history.

For good measure, Kepner later delves into another story related to Maz: the strange phenomenon in the 1960s of umpires' taking players' hats. Mazeroski memorably windmilled his helmet as he rounded the bases *(above)* but gave the memento away to home plate umpire Bill Jackowski, who simply asked for it.

Few people—especially of his generation—love baseball like Kepner, who has been with the *Times* for more than 20 years. In *The Grandest Stage* he describes playing a dice game he invented as a kid in the 1980s that re-created World Series matchups. That *joie de ball* exists to this day (Kepner remains a fan of simulating old games), and it is evident throughout the work. Yes, technically it's a history book but one that succeeds in entertaining as well as educating. There are seven chapters (a nod to the seven-game Series) highlighting lesser-known moments as well as the familiar ones. Kepner talked to scores of players (Dennis Eckersley's take on the walk-off homer he gave up to Kirk Gibson in '88—after walking a .196 hitter—is insightful and unprintable), producing a work that is, like its fall subject, a classic. *—Mark Bechtel*

MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

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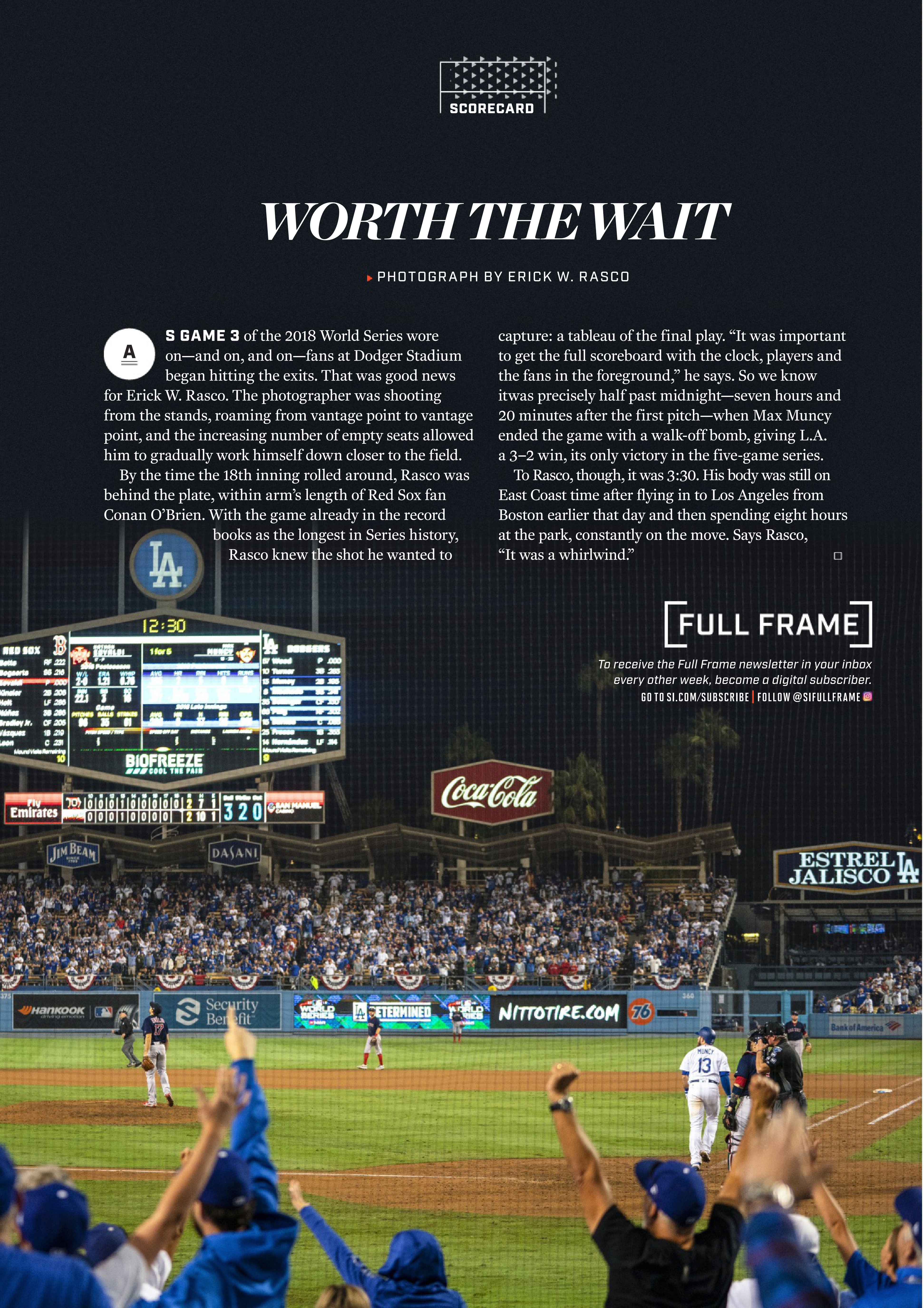
WORTH THE WAIT

▸ PHOTOGRAPH BY ERICK W. RASCO

AS GAME 3 of the 2018 World Series wore on—and on, and on—fans at Dodger Stadium began hitting the exits. That was good news for Erick W. Rasco. The photographer was shooting from the stands, roaming from vantage point to vantage point, and the increasing number of empty seats allowed him to gradually work himself down closer to the field.

By the time the 18th inning rolled around, Rasco was behind the plate, within arm's length of Red Sox fan Conan O'Brien. With the game already in the record books as the longest in Series history, Rasco knew the shot he wanted to capture: a tableau of the final play. "It was important to get the full scoreboard with the clock, players and the fans in the foreground," he says. So we know itwas precisely half past midnight—seven hours and 20 minutes after the first pitch—when Max Muncy ended the game with a walk-off bomb, giving L.A. a 3–2 win, its only victory in the five-game series.

To Rasco, though, it was 3:30. His body was still on East Coast time after flying in to Los Angeles from Boston earlier that day and then spending eight hours at the park, constantly on the move. Says Rasco, "It was a whirlwind."


12:30
RED SOX
DODGERS
BIOFREEZE
COOL THE PAIN
Fly Emirates
3 2 0
Coca-Cola
JIM BEAM
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FACES IN THE CROWD

▸ *Photograph by* **TAYLOR BALLANTYNE**

JALONI CAMBRIDGE

Birthplace: **Nashville**

Date of Birth: **Nov. 19, 2005**

Sport: **Basketball**

School: **Ensworth School**

Position: **Guard**

▸**THE NO. 2 GIRLS** recruit in the 2024 class, Jaloni Cambridge has never known a life without basketball. The junior guard was on the court as soon as she could walk. Four of her five older siblings have competed at the collegiate level—brothers Desmond and Devan will both play for Arizona State this season—and her childhood coach was her father, Desmond Cambridge Sr., who played at Alabama A&M.

Last season the 5' 0" Jaloni averaged 17.3 points, 6.4 rebounds, 3.1 assists and 3.8 steals a game and led the Ensworth School to the Division II-AA state championship, taking tournament MVP honors. She missed the Tigers' postseason run as a freshman with an elbow injury, which made winning this title with her sister Kennedy, now a freshman guard at Kentucky, all the sweeter.

In July, Jaloni started all seven games for Team USA at the FIBA U17 World Cup in Debrecen, Hungary, scoring a team-high 16 points with nine assists and six rebounds in the gold-medal win against Spain. After the victory, Jaloni stayed up talking to teammates and players from the Australian team until 5 a.m.

"It's amazing to get the opportunity to put on that USA uniform and play with the top-ranked players in the country," Jaloni says. "You are there for basketball, but you experience good friendship. Our bonds were more than just basketball." —*Emily Schumacher*

UPDATE

RAISING THE BAR

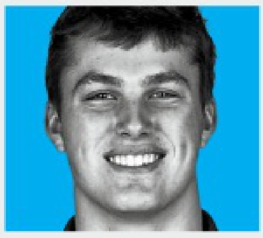
TAMARA WALCOTT went into the American Pro powerlifting competition in July in Manassas, Va., a bit distracted and full of doubt. She was dealing with a nagging knee injury and couldn't squat four weeks before the event. Walcott may have walked into the event without much confidence, but she left with a world record: She deadlifted 639 pounds, breaking her own mark.

When she appeared in the December 2021 edition of Faces in the Crowd, Walcott had not only set her first world-record deadlift at 636 pounds, but also had undergone a personal transformation. The 38-year-old mother of two began lifting to "get strong" and lost 130 pounds in the process. Soon, she found herself on *Good Morning America* and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*.

"I've gotten a jolt of just continuing to be my true, authentic self," she says. "Now, I truly have a platform where I can show people that anything you put your mind to, it's never too late." *—Dan Falkenheim*

GREGG JOCHIMSEN Sport: **Kubb** Hometown: **Eau Claire, Wis.**

Jochimsen, a social studies teacher at Chippewa Falls Middle School, became the first U.S. player to win the Kubb World Championship, taking the team and individual titles in Gotland, Sweden. Jochimsen has played kubb—a lawn game where a player attempts to toss a baton and knock over his opponent's five wooden blocks—since 2010 and is a five-time U.S. champ.



CHARLIE BERRIDGE Sport: **Golf** Hometown: **Scarsdale, N.Y.**

Berridge, a sophomore at Cal, won the New York State Men's Amateur Championship, shooting a tournament-record 14-under-par 270 at Onondaga Golf and Country Club. A 2019 high school state champion, Berridge was named Cal's Most Improved Player for '21–22.

NOMINATE NOW

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email **faces@si.com**.

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COURTESY OF NIA RICE (UPDATE); COURTESY OF GREGG JOCHIMSEN (JOCHIMSEN); KELLEY COX/KLC FOTOS (BERRIDGE)

All Eyes on

All around the NBA, there are teams and players with unfinished business to take care of in the new season. At the top of the list: **ZION WILLIAMSON**, who wondered if he'd ever play again after a broken foot erased all of last year. The Pelicans' 22-year-old phenom put in the work, physically and mentally—and now

HE'S READY TO SHOW THE WORLD WHAT HE'S MADE OF

ibotta
PELICANS
1

BY
HOWARD BECK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JEFFERY A. SALTER

It's 6:14 a.m. on a late-summer day, and the track at Florida Atlantic University is shrouded in darkness,

save for the faint beams of light bouncing from the waistbands of three joggers, dutifully logging their steps before the world awakens. They move at a casual pace, thoroughly oblivious to the athletic marvel in their midst.

"I can clock *60,*" boasts a voice in the darkness, and then he's gone—a hulking silhouette slicing through the predawn shadows.

"They ain't ready for you!" barks another voice. "They ain't ready for you!"

Less than 60 seconds later, Zion Williamson is back where he started, darting across an invisible finish line, having easily beaten his goal for his last quarter-mile dash of the morning. "That's *elite*!" enthuses a third voice—his stepfather and coach, Lee Anderson.

It's an important marker for the young Pelicans star as he makes his way back from a broken right foot and a lost season. It's a remarkable feat for anyone, period. But the South Florida sun won't rise for another 49 minutes on this September morning, and the joggers and late-arriving soccer players have no idea what they just missed. The only real witnesses are Williamson's personal trainer, a few family members and a reporter.

"I personally haven't seen a guy with his size at the NBA level with that type of speed," says the trainer, Jasper Bibbs, as the group strolls back to the FAU gym to finish the morning workout. "There's some *guards* that don't hit those times," adds Bibbs, who previously spent five years with the Jazz. Even more encouraging? That Williamson hit that time *after* he'd already run a mile and a half as a warmup.

Had there been a little daylight, here's what everyone else on that track would have seen: a swift, sculpted 6' 6" tower of muscle, streaking down the straightaways like a supersized Usain Bolt. This Zion Williamson is noticeably more contoured than the Zion Williamson who last appeared on an NBA court on May 4, 2021. Still brawny and stout, yes, but seemingly much closer to his college weight of 285 pounds than the estimated 300-plus he carried through the '20–21 season.

It's been three years since Williamson seized the NBA spotlight, a uniquely bound blend of power and grace, a can't-miss superstar, a No. 1 pick with the charisma to match his talent. On the court, he dazzles, with the kind of devastating efficiency—25.7 points on 60% shooting—that would rank him among the all-time greats. Except, he has played just 85 games over three seasons due to injuries.

We haven't seen Zion soar for 17 months, leaving the world to wonder: Is he still the prince that was promised? Or just a phantom passing through the twilight? What will he be when he at last takes the court again on Oct. 19, in Brooklyn?

"They're going to see that I've matured off the court and on the court," Williamson, now 22, says, following a late breakfast at a 6,000-square-foot waterfront rental in Fort Lauderdale. "And they're also gonna see that my game has evolved. I'm gonna show the world things that I've had in my arsenal that I didn't show before."

What we'll soon witness, he says, is a Zion transformed, mentally and physically, after the most torturous year of his life: a fractured right foot, followed by a surgery, a setback and a perpetual cascade of criticism and scorn from fans and pundits.

Zion is out of shape, they said (albeit in much harsher terms). *Zion isn't committed to the game. Zion isn't committed to New Orleans. Zion is detached from his teammates.* The physical recovery was hard enough. The negativity was suffocating.

"I was in dark places at times," Williamson says, "because I couldn't play basketball. I could only do limited rehab things. And then just seeing how the world reacted? It took a lot. It did a lot on my spirit."

Outwardly, he's in the best shape of his career, though he greets questions about weight, body fat and other metrics with just a sprawling smile. He's pleased, yes. But Team Zion isn't ready to disclose specifics on this day, not with another three weeks of work before reporting to training camp. "I'm not done yet," Williamson says.

Not done, he means, with the two-a-day workouts that began here Aug. 3, nor with a disciplined new diet, as prescribed by his personal chef, Jhonas Lewis (known simply as Chef J.D.). Williamson gulps water from a two-gallon thermos throughout the day, having eschewed all other beverages.

Soon enough, Williamson will seek to reclaim his role as one of the game's premier showmen—a high-flying, rim-wrecking nuclear reactor. Except he's now returning to a Pelicans team that made the playoffs without him, with a new coach, an overhauled roster, a star wing in Brandon Ingram and a star playmaker in CJ McCollum. So much has changed in the 17 months that Zion was away. But then, he says, so has he.

"I've grown," Williamson says. "I learned a lot about myself, learned more about the game."

So while the rest of us might view this season as a Revenge Tour or a Remember Me campaign, Zion Williamson himself sees it more as a gauge: of just how far he's come, of how well he's recovered, rebuilt and evolved in the 533 days between his last game and his next one.

AT THIS EMOTIONAL nadir, as the doubts and denigration grew increasingly toxic, Williamson retreated to the Pacific Northwest—and unwittingly stoked the very fire he was trying to escape. It was January, and Williamson had decided to continue his rehab at Nike's bucolic campus just outside

SOUTHEASTERN
2019 ELITE EIGHT
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SUNSHINE STATEMENT
After recouping in Oregon, Williamson showed off his new frame in Florida.

Portland, in Beaverton, Ore. He would spend two months there.

He did so with the blessing of Pelicans officials—indeed, it was executive vice president David Griffin who first suggested a change of scenery—but the news only triggered more backlash, fueling public perceptions of a divide between Williamson and the franchise, Williamson and New Orleans, Williamson and his teammates.

The truth was far more troubling. The setback Williamson suffered in early December—tests showed regression in the healing of his broken foot—had crushed his spirit. “I was rehabbing,” he says, “and in my mind I’m thinking, *Man, in two weeks I’m about to play again*. And then I didn’t.” And the criticism had turned nastier, falling on the shoulders of his mom, his stepdad and his brother, Noah, who was just 8 at the time.

“To see it affecting my family, it weighed on me,” Williamson says. “An 8-year-old having to deal with stuff like that, being asked questions that he don’t fully understand yet, that’s a lot. It bothers me that people would even do that to him.”

Williamson later adds: “I felt helpless. I couldn’t do nothing about it. While [pundits] are telling me I don’t care about my teammates, or I’m a bad teammate, or I don’t want to be somewhere, the whole time I’m worried about my foot. I’m worried about, *Man, I hope my foot heals right, because if it doesn’t, who knows, I may not get to play basketball again*.”

The toll grew so heavy that Williamson could hardly mask the strain. After a home game one night, as he walked out of the Smoothie King Center, he ran into Pelicans assistant coach Teresa Weatherspoon, a close friend and confidant.

“Hey, are you O.K.?” she asked.

“No,” Williamson replied, “I’m not.”

“And when he said no, he just fell into my arms,” Weatherspoon says.

A long conversation followed—part counseling session, part pep talk, unconditional support mixed with moments of tough love. And many tears shed along the way.

“At that most vulnerable moment, it was important for me to let him know that he’s a great young man and he’s worthy of those things that you work for,” says Weatherspoon, the former WNBA star and Hall of Famer. “I could

“I FELT HELPLESS,” WILLIAMSON SAYS. “I’M WORRIED ABOUT, MAN, I HOPE MY FOOT HEALS RIGHT, BECAUSE IF IT DOESN’T, WHO KNOWS, I MAY NOT GET TO PLAY BASKETBALL AGAIN.”

JESSE D. GARRABRANT/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

SPALDING
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BIG EASY Before missing last season, Williamson made things look simple in New Orleans, averaging 27.0 points and 7.2 boards per game in 2020–21.

see a young man fighting to find his way, had lost all sense of direction. And I just wanted to reach out at that moment and to let him know: I didn't care about basketball; I cared about what he was feeling, what he was thinking, how difficult were things for him at that moment.”

She adds, “I didn't want him to feel alone. And when I tell you there were some dark days for that young man, there was some dark days. . . . It was much bigger than basketball at that point. You didn't want to lose a young man.”

It was just one of many such discussions along the way, as Williamson worked to repair both his body and his psyche, one day at a time. He leaned hard on the 56-year-old Weatherspoon (“she's like my big sister”) and assistant coach Corey Brewer (“my people for life”), as well as his family and his faith.

Of Weatherspoon, Williamson says, “She saved me from so many kind of like mental breakdowns. When you see somebody cry for you because of what you're going through—she cried for me. She didn't have to do that. . . . And just seeing that made me realize, *Wow, I really have somebody special in my corner.*”

With the emotional support came a consistent theme: *Your success, your health and your happiness are up to you.* All those worries about Williamson's fitness, his maturity, his commitment? It's clear the Pelicans had them, too.

As Weatherspoon frequently tells him: “The things that you desire in this game, or in life period, it's what you put into it. . . . But you *have* to put in. You have to make deposits. You can't take something out if you haven't deposited; you haven't invested in it.”

By early January, Williamson and his family would be in Portland, with Bibbs presiding over the rehabilitation program laid out by the Pelicans' medical staff. He chose the Nike campus after a conversation with Griffin, who he says told him, “ ‘Z, I think you just need a break, away from this. You need to go somewhere and just get your mental [straight].’ ”

Griffin confirms the exchange: “The most important part of a player's rehab from a surgery is their mental well-being. We wanted to reset the deck and put him in a better position to succeed. . . . He was struggling a little bit with watching people play ball, and he couldn't do it. It hurt him to not be with his teammates.”

“AFTER THIS JOURNEY,” WILLIAMSON SAYS, “IT'S NOT EVEN SO MUCH ABOUT SHOWING THE WORLD WHO I AM. IT'S MORE SO JUST PROVING MYSELF RIGHT.”

ibotta
PELICANS

A HEALTHIER, MORE SERENE Zion returned to New Orleans in early March, in time to cheer on the Pelicans' late-season renaissance, sparked by the midseason trade for McCollum. The Pels won 13 of their final 25 regular-season games, ousted the Spurs and Clippers in the play-in tournament and briefly rattled the Suns in the first round before falling in six games. The Smoothie King Center—moribund or empty for much of Williamson's career due to the coronavirus pandemic—was rocking.

“That was special,” Williamson says, lighting up at the recollection. “I remember sitting on the bench. Even though I was sitting still, I felt like my blood was racing, like I was playing out there. I haven't felt that thrill, a crowd being like that, since my rookie year. And man, it was something. It was something to witness.”

Then he laughed, recalling all the rumors about his wanderlust. “People really out here think that I could witness something like that and then tell myself I don't want to be [there]?”

McCollum's arrival in February—via a trade with Portland that also included Larry Nance Jr. and cost the Pelicans only role players and draft picks—had spurred another minor controversy, when former Pelicans guard and ESPN analyst JJ Redick revealed Williamson had not reached out to his new teammate. "Detached," Redick called him, echoing concerns that had been filtering through the organization for some time. But McCollum and Williamson would later connect, sharing several dinners and some extended conversations about work habits, nutrition, hydration, sleep, "just being a professional," McCollum says. "I think he appreciated my candor."

In their brief time as teammates, McCollum says he's seen a Zion who is "very active, very engaged, very involved, very cognizant of what's going on."

"But he also understands that the onus is on him now," McCollum says, "to do things the right way, to continue to eat the right way, to do the work the right way. . . . I think he's at that stage now where he's taking responsibility for his actions." All of which echoes what Weatherspoon herself conveyed to Williamson: "The change has to come, and the change has to come from him. And he knew that."

There are basic basketball challenges to sort out now with Williamson joining McCollum and Ingram—about roles and playmaking and pecking orders, about touches and usage rate—but chemistry comes only through time, and the Pelicans seem confident about the road ahead and their potential to make noise in the West. Williamson says he's thrilled to have two elite scorers to share the load and more shooters on the roster than he's had since arriving in New Orleans.

"The best version that he can give us," McCollum says of Williamson, "will be the best version of our team."

"W**HAT'S UP WITH** *Zion?!"* a young girl asks, a touch of concern in her voice, as if speaking for millions of fans who are wondering where he's been, how he's doing and what he'll look like when he reemerges.

"He's training underwater!" a young boy responds excitedly. *"Yeah, he's coming for* everybody *next year."*

Well, not exactly, but you can't blame the Jordan Brand marketing team for having fun with the mystery of it all in a recent series of ads for the Zion 2 shoe. Williamson has rarely been seen or heard in the last 17 months, outside of a July 6 press conference to announce a contract extension worth at least $193 million (a deal that, sources confirm, includes weight and body-fat requirements).

The what/where/when/how of Williamson's recovery are topics he prefers to keep private, which also partially explains his two-month stays in Portland and Fort Lauderdale. "I don't like

SLIMMER CHANCES
A Zion who is lighter than when he last played in 2021 should put the West powers on notice.

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NOAH GRAHAM/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

people to know my next move,” he says. Nor does he want to reveal anything about his training, his diet, his weight, his sprint times or the skills he’s been quietly honing all these months off the radar.

“I’m one of those people that I like to show you more than I tell you,” Williamson says. “Because I feel like when I tell, it doesn’t even feel humble at all. So,”—and here he claps for emphasis—“I have to show the world.”

And though he won’t divulge his weight, Williamson jokes that he wouldn’t mind that number leaking—as a counterpoint to the whispers of him once weighing 330 pounds. “When I step on the scale when we start training camp, I wonder if there’s gonna be any rumors about that!” he says, laughing.

The more Williamson reflects, the more amped he sounds, and soon he is naming everyone who made this journey with him, as if he were onstage at the Oscars. He thanks Anderson and Bibbs for their training, and Chef J.D. for his diet (“the main keys to why I look the way I look now, why I feel as great as I do”); thanks his friends Axel Nyembwe, Phil Holmes and Kailik Faulk for supporting him through his workouts (and sometimes participating in them). “Everybody’s played some kind of part,” he says. “But what this journey was about that I’m on currently, down in Fort Lauderdale, this was to test my love for the game.”

There is nothing about Zion that seems detached or disengaged on this day. He smiles often, laughs frequently and speaks candidly, alternating between moments of somber reflection and bursts of unbridled enthusiasm, always finishing on a positive note: “It was a long, tedious process,” he’ll say, before quickly adding, “but it’s nothing but excitement and just pure joy and love for the game I get to return to.”

It calls to mind a quote from Stan Williams, the Pelicans’ strength coach, who often told Williamson during his recovery, “Look, it only makes the story better.” It first struck Williamson as “corny,” but he came to embrace it. “I really feel that,” he says. “Like, if I can really come back from this right . . . this could be something crazy.”

IT’S 5:20 A.M. on that early-September morning when two black SUVs pull up to the back door of the FAU Arena, delivering Williamson, Bibbs and Anderson, along with Zion’s mom, Sharonda Sampson, Noah, and a small group of friends and assistants, including on this day his barber (for a SPORTS ILLUSTRATED photo shoot).

This has been Williamson’s routine every day since Team Zion decamped to Fort Lauderdale: rising at 4:50 a.m., arriving at FAU a half hour later for a morning conditioning session with Bibbs, followed

RISING AGAIN

— By Rohan Nadkarni —

GREG NELSON

KAWHI LEONARD

SF › Clippers

▸ Leonard’s career is increasingly becoming defined by when he doesn’t play. From 2017 to ’22, he competed in his team’s entire postseason only twice—his ’19 title run with the Raptors and his ’20 Bubble exit with the Clippers. He missed all of last season following ACL surgery. When healthy, though, he remains in contention for the best-player-alive conversation. L.A. needs him for any serious hopes at winning a title.

by basketball drills with Anderson. The timing is deliberate, designed to get them out by 7:45, before the women's volleyball team takes over the gym—and to hopefully avoid detection by curious onlookers.

The morning workout is often followed by a 30-minute spin session at Hotworx, a combo fitness center/sauna, with the room's thermostat cranked to 130 degrees, to burn extra calories. Then comes a breakfast from Chef J.D., an afternoon nap, an early dinner and, finally, another round of training and drills in the evening, at Nova Southeastern. Williamson's day concludes after 9 p.m., the skies dark again.

The time for spotlights and highlights and "Yo, remember me?" jackhammer dunks will be here soon enough, a time to show instead of tell. But Zion 2.0 says none of that really matters to him, at least not in the way we expect.

"If you would have asked me two years ago, I definitely would have said, 'Yeah, I need to remind people. I need to show the world who Zion is,' " he says. "But now, after this journey, it's not even so much about showing the world who I am. It's more so just proving myself right."

Six years ago, a 16-year-old Zion Williamson tweeted a six-word vow—"I'm going to shock the world"—a sentiment that suddenly seems apt for 22-year-old Zion Williamson, in a way he never could have envisioned. The path has been more twisted, more painful, than he ever could have known. But then, it just makes the story better. □

Williamson isn't the only NBA star making his long-awaited return. These game-changers are also poised to be back in action after missing major time—if not all of—last season

DAMIAN LILLARD

PG › Trail Blazers

▸ Dame Time slowed down in 2021–22, when Lillard was sidelined after 29 games with an abdominal injury. The six-time All-Star, who signed an extension with the Blazers this offseason, should be doubly motivated to prove last year's poor shooting numbers were a fluke and get his team back to the playoffs.

JAMAL MURRAY

PG › Nuggets

▸ The last time Murray played in the postseason, the Nuggets made the conference finals. That should be the goal for Denver with its star guard back in the fold following an ACL injury that cost him all of last year. His partnership with Nikola Jokić is the key to Denver's breaking through in the West.

MICHAEL PORTER JR.

SF › Nuggets

▸ Denver also gets back Porter, who missed most of last season following back surgery. MPJ is a bucket and a half, brûléeing opponents with his silky jump shot. While his struggles on D make him a fascinating wild card come the postseason, his ignitability reduces the burden on Denver's other stars.

BEN SIMMONS

PG › Nets

▸ Simmons sat out the first half of last season with the Sixers, then was shipped at the trade deadline to Brooklyn, where he has yet to suit up. This offseason he had back surgery. Still, the All-NBA talent can be a difference-maker. Whether he can block out the noise and focus on the floor is anybody's guess.

JAMES WISEMAN

C › Warriors

▸ Wiseman, who missed his entire sophomore season with a knee injury, could be lethal for the reigning champs as an athletic big with good size and shooting touch. The question is: Will the 21-year-old have enough time to work through growing pains on a team that's championship or bust?

FROM LEFT: DAVID E. KLUTHO; JAMIE SCHWABEROW; GARRETT ELLWOOD/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/NBA/GETTY IMAGES; ISAIAH J. DOWNING/USA TODAY SPORTS

Jayson Tatum, Al Horford, Marcus Smart, Robert Williams III and Jaylen Brown

The Finals loss on the parquet floor still stings. The trade rumors may linger. And a controversy that forced a coaching change hangs over the franchise. But, after a long offseason, **THE CELTICS,** with a stacked roster and loads of motivation, are focused on moving forward and bringing another title to Boston

GREEN Light

BY
CHRIS MANNIX

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JEFFERY A. SALTER

GROWING PAINS
Tatum's All-NBA season ended on a sour note on his home floor.

In the underbelly of TD Garden,

beneath the black upholstered seats and a long outlet pass from the famed parquet floor, the home and road locker rooms lie parallel to each other, separated by only a narrow hallway and a white paint-splashed concrete wall. A very *un*-soundproof wall, it turns out, one that the Celtics—had they been able to foresee the outcome of the 2022 Finals—would have bolted acoustic panels to years ago. Inside Boston's locker room, minutes after they dropped a series-clinching Game 6 to Golden State, tears flowed. Blank faces stared down at crumpled stat sheets. Ime Udoka was the first to break the silence. "And I don't think he wanted to," says center Al Horford. Outside, the roar from dozens of champagne-soaked Warriors players and personnel was unavoidable. The pulsing from the hip-hop music vibrated through the floors. "Trust me," says Horford, "we could hear *everything*."

Even now, Jayson Tatum winces at the memory. Leaning back in his locker that night, everything he accomplished—All-Star starter, All-NBA First Team, the seventh-highest scoring average (26.9 ppg) in Celtics history—felt meaningless. Showered, changed and fresh from rehashing the Finals with a few dozen reporters, Tatum could still hear the celebration as he walked to his car. "Definitely not a good feeling," he says. What he saw earlier bothered him more: Golden State's celebrating on Boston's home floor. "That," says Tatum, who shot only 36.7% from the field during the Finals, "I'll never forget."

The NBA season is a six-month slog, eight if, like Boston, you make a deep playoff run. Tatum's felt longer. Since 2020, when Tatum logged 41 minutes per game during the Celtics' 17-game postseason in the NBA bubble, his breaks have been brief. The bubble quickly transitioned to the COVID-19-squeezed, 72-game '20–21 season (35.8 minutes per game for Tatum in that one), which gave way to a weeks-long trip to Tokyo for the Olympics that then dropped him right into '21–22. The mental drain of last season is well chronicled: the 18–21 start, the players-only meetings, the daily public tongue-lashings from Udoka, the first-year coach brought in to shake things up after Brad Stevens took over as team president. Tatum, rarely rattled, recalled an early-January team bus ride after Boston blew a 20-point lead in New York . . . which came after the Celtics lost on a missed layup to San Antonio . . . which came on the heels of a three-game post-Christmas losing streak; he wondered whether they would ever figure it out.

There was the physical toll, too, which was less visible. A mid-February left wrist injury—later diagnosed as a nondisplaced fracture—caused Tatum considerable pain. He downplayed the injury, slipping on a soft cast behind closed doors, taking it off when the cameras were rolling and protecting the wrist with tape an inch thick during games while consciously avoiding using it to break his falls. He played 76 games. His minutes (35.9) were a career high. In the playoffs, they jumped to 41.0. Drew Hanlen, Tatum's longtime trainer, communicates with him daily. When the Finals ended, Hanlen says he didn't hear from his client for nearly two weeks. "I was exhausted," says Tatum. "Didn't feel like talking to anybody. Didn't feel like being bothered. It's hard to explain if you have never been in that situation. But losing a championship was f---ing miserable."

Success is defined by championships, nowhere more so than in Boston, where the 17 banners dangling from the rafters create a literal bar for it. Yet it's hard to argue that a season that began so underwhelmingly, that ended so impressively (34–12 after Jan. 1, the NBA's third-best finish), that culminated with the franchise's first Finals appearance in 12 years, wasn't one. Or that the Celtics, stocked with 20-something stars, weren't well positioned for more.

GREG NELSON

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But are they? Boston's offseason was anything but smooth sailing. Days before training camp, it emerged that Udoka had been involved in a relationship with a female staff member, in violation of team policies, leading the team to suspend him for the season. That meant it would fall to Joe Mazzulla, a 34-year-old assistant who has been with the team for three years, to navigate the team through not only the coaching upheaval, but also the other issues that had become talking points over the summer, namely whether Tatum, after a three-figure turnover postseason, had another level. Whether Marcus Smart, his Defensive Player of the Year hardware still shining, was the right fit as a lead guard. Whether Jaylen Brown was a championship-level costar—or whether Boston needed to get aggressive in pursuit of a suddenly available former MVP.

LET'S TALK ABOUT the photos of Tatum and Kevin Durant, Olympic teammates turned summer workout partners that went viral after a Celtics photographer posted them to Instagram. Innocent, if you ask Tatum, who befriended the NBA star as a high school prospect. A year after winning gold in Tokyo, Tatum and Durant met up for a few days in Los Angeles this offseason. The relationship, says Hanlen, was symbiotic. Tatum studied Durant's ball protection (the 100 turnovers Tatum committed in last season's playoffs were an NBA record), how KD uses his hips and shoulders to shield it from defenders and is able to protect it as he finishes. Durant scrutinized Tatum's hesitation dribble and side-step jumpers.

In the gym with other NBA players, including Bulls guards Zach LaVine and DeMar DeRozan, Tatum was intense. Post-Finals, says Hanlen, Tatum developed a surliness. "He has become obsessed with winning," says Hanlen. In one-on-one games. "Didn't lose one all summer," says Hanlen. In five-on-five. During one session, Tatum's team fell behind 0–2 in a best of seven. Before the start of the third game, Tatum barked at his teammates that they wouldn't lose another. They didn't. To increase his burst on drives—Tatum was fouled on only 9.8% of his drives last season, a number he'd like to tick up—he adjusted his posture, dropping his body lower when he faced up. He shot hundreds of floaters. He explored ways to better fight fatigue, tweaking his diet and increasing his conditioning drills. He quizzed Durant, who is no stranger to a heavy workload, on his habits. "I'm

ON THE BLOCK
Brown (right) averaged 23.5 ppg in the Finals, then showed up in trade talks.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

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Stephanie Gilmore - Sally Fitzgibbons - Kelly Slater

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still young enough where I feel like I can learn from a lot of guys,” says the 24-year-old Tatum. “And he’s one of the best to ever do it.”

The issue: At the time the pictures swept through social media, Durant had requested a trade. The Nets had engaged several teams—including Boston—in trade talks. Brown, according to *The Athletic*, had been discussed in a swap. Talking heads, starved for summer sports story lines, jumped on the Brown-for-Durant debate. In July, Tatum attended the premiere of *NYC Point Gods*, a Durant-produced documentary, where he awkwardly answered questions about a Celtics shakeup. “I try not to believe everything I see on TV because I’ve seen things about me that just flat-out weren’t true,” Tatum says. “There are so many different rumors and stories that you hear. You never exactly know what’s true, who’s leaking or what’s the agenda.”

In an interview before the season, Brown declined to address the trade rumors. His lone public response: a three-letter tweet (“smh”) after news of the Celtics-Nets talks became public. (Brown no-commented that question, too.) But he has been in this position before. In 2018, when Boston was rumored to be in the mix for Kawhi Leonard. In ’19, when the Celtics pursued Anthony Davis. Regardless of the success of the Tatum-Brown pairing—three conference finals in five seasons together, with one trip to the Finals—there are routinely stories about breaking them up.

Tatum admits that he wondered how Brown would react to the latest round of rumors. “It’s never easy,” says Tatum. The friendship, which began when the two were teenagers, roommates at an Under Armour camp, has grown stronger. In 2017, when Boston was debating between Tatum and Josh Jackson in the draft, it was Brown, in a late-night phone call to then GM Danny Ainge, who gave Tatum a push. Ask those in and around the Celtics about the relationship between the two, and the answers are similar. *Great*. Ask privately whether there is *any* friction, and the answers are the same. “Jayson brags about how good Jaylen is,” says Hanlen. “How there aren’t many players he would trade straight up for him. Any narrative that they didn’t like each other, that they can’t win together is totally made up.”

“I WAS EXHAUSTED,” SAYS TATUM. “IT’S HARD TO EXPLAIN IF YOU HAVE NEVER BEEN IN THAT SITUATION. BUT LOSING A CHAMPIONSHIP WAS F---ING MISERABLE.”

STARS ALIGN
Tatum, who played with Durant in Tokyo in 2021 (above), saw their workout photos go viral.

BRENDAN MORAN/SPORTSFILE/GETTY IMAGES

In August, Stevens and Udoka traveled to Los Angeles to meet with Brown. Their message: *We want you here*. And they came away with the feeling that Brown wasn’t going to be fixated on whatever talks had occurred. In other words, he wanted to be there, too.

IN MID-SEPTEMBER, DURING a break in a photo shoot at Boston’s practice facility, Brown, Horford and Robert Williams III huddled. It had been three months since the season ended, and, save for a few scattered workouts, this was the first time the core of the team had been back together. Quickly, the discussion shifted to next season. “Just about hitting the ground running,” says Williams. “Not having the same start that we had last year. And letting people know that what we did, it wasn’t a fluke.”

The loss of Udoka will sting. Mazzulla is considered a rising star in the coaching ranks, but his head coaching experience totals two seasons at Division II Fairmont State. Steering an NBA title contender is a sizable challenge.

Still, on paper, Boston is loaded. Smart and Williams (who will miss the start of the season after knee surgery) anchor the NBA’s best defense. Tatum spearheads an offense that had the second-highest scoring margin (plus-7.3) last season. There is room for organic growth, with sharpshooting power forward Grant Williams and backup point guard Payton Pritchard, in addition to their stars just approaching their primes. “We’re building this thing around the strengths of Jaylen and Jayson and anybody that accentuates those guys,” says Stevens. “We’re always on the lookout for the

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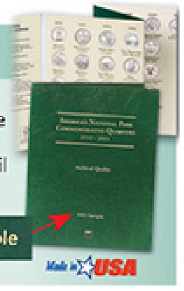
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GARDEN STATEMENT

The Celtics are out to prove their first Finals appearance in 12 years was no fluke.

kind of guys that can do that." The offseason addition of point guard Malcolm Brogdon, who was acquired from Indiana, beefs up the bench. Brogdon has started the past four seasons, but Stevens emphasized that Smart's spot is secure. This summer Smart studied film of Bucks guard Jrue Holiday, noting the adjustments Holiday made after being paired with Giannis Antetokounmpo and Khris Middleton, and the impact Holiday was able to make on both ends of the floor. "His whole thing was, 'How do I help them in whatever way they needed?' " says Smart. And Brogdon? "I was ecstatic we got him," says Smart, who has a long relationship with him. "It's putting me with someone I know for a fact is going to make me better. He is going to push me. And I am going to push him."

The rest of the returning Celtics don't have to look far for motivation. Few things light a fire under a player like losing in the Finals. So Tatum brushes off compliments about Boston's season. "It's hard to call it a good year," says Tatum, "when you f---ing lose a championship." Horford calls last season "a step in the right direction." Brown, asked how long it took him to move past the Finals defeat, says, "I'm still not past it."

To get past it, sacrifice must be embraced, says Tatum. Boston, even after the potential season-ending injury to newly signed veteran forward Danilo Gallinari, can claim one of the NBA's deepest rosters. "Once we started sacrificing and being more of a team last year," says Tatum, "that's when we became the best team in the league."

But coming off the Finals, the Celtics won't surprise anybody. Which, unsurprisingly, suits them fine. In Atlanta, Horford spent time with Brogdon over the summer. "Anytime we're talking, it's nothing to do with offense or defense," says Horford. "It's literally, 'What can I do?' or, 'How can I help our team to put us in position to win?' "

A pair of championships at Florida taught Horford about approaching being the hunted, too. After Florida won in 2006, Gators coach Billy Donovan's message was simple: *They are coming for you. You come for them.* "And we were so driven that year," says Horford. "That's how this team has to be. We had an edge to us last year. We need to keep it."

All the offseason questions have appeared to sharpen it. "Hell yeah, we have got a chip on our shoulders," says Robert Williams III. "It's not even about proving it to other people. It's about staying true to ourselves. It's about showing your teammates, 'We're still here. And we've got this.' " ☐

JEFFERY A. SALTER

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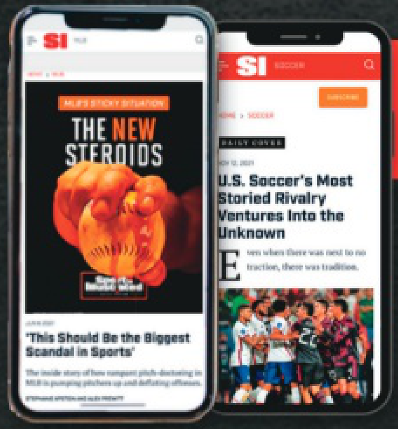
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INSTANT PRE

Sure, NBA players receive scrutiny, but if you want to
the bench to the coaches tasked with deciding whether
They are the **CHALLENGE GUYS**—and when

MAVERICKS
77
GOLDEN
WAR

SSURE

know where the real heat is, look down
to contest questionable calls.
the whistle blows, all eyes are on them

BY **Chris Mannix**

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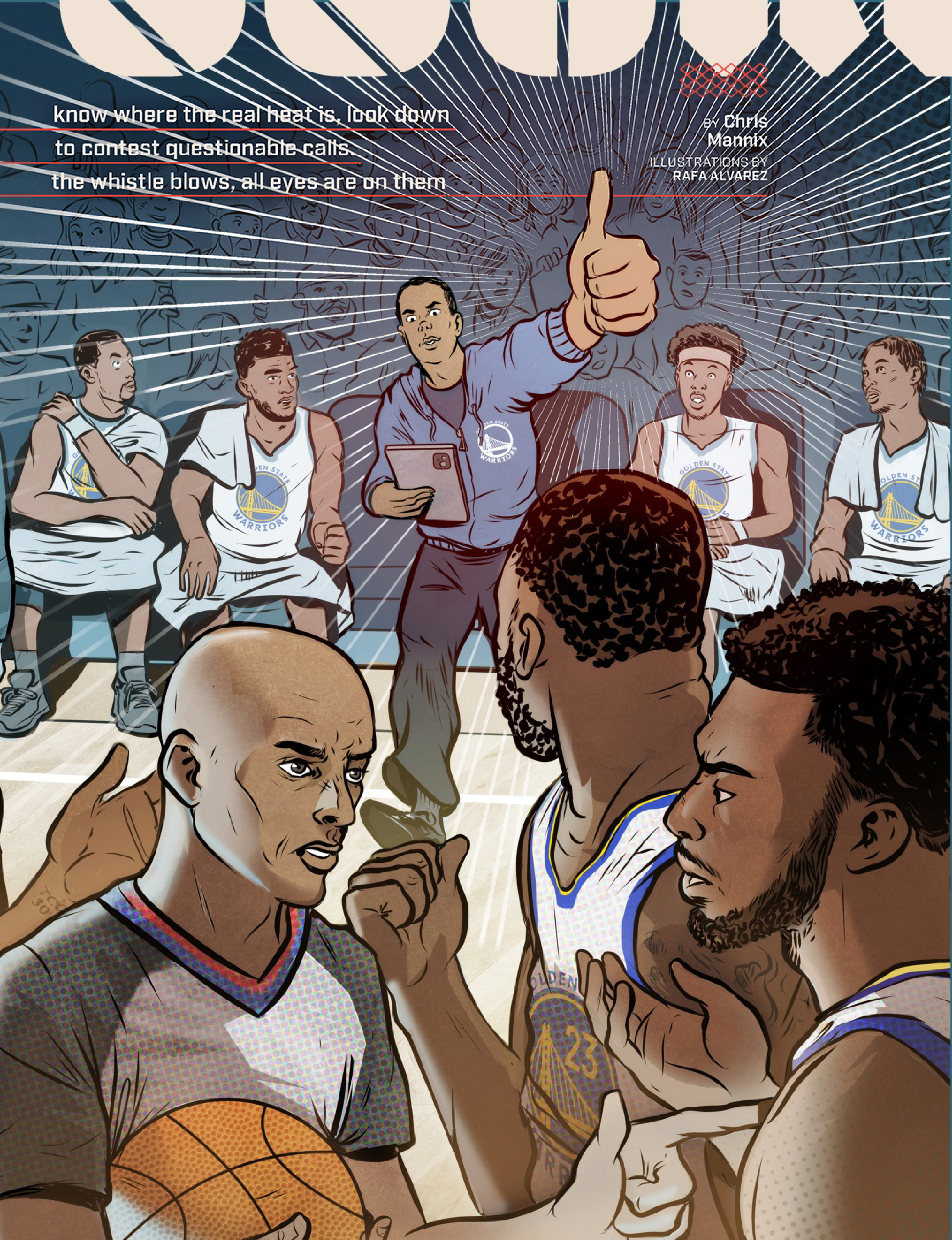
GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS
23

FROM HIS SEAT behind the team bench, Ryan Lumpkin, a 26-year-old player development coach for the Wizards, could feel the eyeballs bearing down on him. It was last October, in the season opener, and Washington star Bradley Beal was whistled for a foul following a collision with Toronto's OG Anunoby. Lumpkin could feel his heart rate spiking. "My Apple Watch," he says, "was telling me something was up."

Matt Reynolds knows the feeling. In the second quarter of Game 3 of Boston's conference semifinals series against Milwaukee, Reynolds, a Celtics assistant, watched as a referee signaled a block on Marcus Smart—a call that, if it had gone the other way, would have meant the third foul on Bucks star Giannis Antetokounmpo. Charles Klask, a Nuggets assistant, winces when he recalls a regular-season game against the 76ers, when JaMychal Green rushed toward him, finger twirling—the universal sign to call for a coach's challenge—because a reversal would mean a fourth foul for Joel Embiid. "Some of these are game-changing moments," says Klask. "All you're thinking is, *I better get this right.*"

The coach's challenge landed in the NBA rule book on a trial basis in 2019, and then permanently a year later. Inspired by the success of the NFL's version, NBA coaches had pushed for it and, after five years of experimentation in the G League, won the right to use it. While it's the head coach who signals for a review—that familiar finger twirl that triggers a neon-green light at the scorer's table that leads to a trio of referees huddling around a monitor—each has someone they lean on. They are, simply, the challenge guys, anonymous assistants, unless your gaze happens upon a backbencher with his head buried in his laptop. They are the people you (unwittingly) cheer when a missed call gets overturned, the ones you (unknowingly) curse when a team refuses to challenge one. When an entire bench swivels on a close play, they are the midlevel staffers in polo shirts everyone is staring at. "Think of them like the long snapper," says Raptors coach Nick Nurse. "Nobody knows who they are until they hike it over the quarterback's head."

CHALLENGE COACHES AREN'T selected as much as drafted. Shortly after the NBA approved the challenge, Reynolds, then Boston's video coordinator, received a text from then Celtics coach Brad Stevens. "You have to become an expert in the rules," the message read. Dylan Murphy, a sports radio intern turned G League assistant, hooked on to Steve Clifford's Magic staff in 2018. He was thrust into the role and immediately devoured the rule book. "There are so many random details," says Murphy, who is still with Orlando. "I had to memorize it."

Jordan Sears, the Mavericks' video coordinator, says he was "kind of roped into it"—in part, he says, because of his calm demeanor. "I knew it would be a stressful job," says Sears. "But I didn't realize how much of a hot seat it is."

For the challenge guy, the job begins before the whistle. "You're always logging things," says Klask. "Do we have timeouts? What are the players' foul situations? Would the challenge lead to our possession or a jump ball? Could it take away points from the board?" After the whistle blows, every moment is precious. "Usually you have about 10 seconds," says Reynolds. "Twenty, max." From a laptop, coaches have access to multiple feeds. There is the arena house video, called the coach's camera, which each team can view. There are home and visiting TV broadcasts. "Sometimes there is a lag of three to five seconds," says Klask. "And it's the longest three to five seconds of your life.” Team broadcasts, which will quickly cut to replays of a close call, often from multiple angles, can be useful. “In theory,” says Reynolds, “you have access to slow-motion replay”—but it’s at the whim of a director. For some challenge guys, an iPad, on which a pinch of the fingers allows them to zoom in, is an asset. But most prefer the larger screens—and ability to cram in multiple views in different windows—afforded by laptops.

There’s gamesmanship with challenges. Several coaches say game operations staff are instructed to get replays of questionable calls against the home team up on the jumbotron quickly. Conversely, when an iffy call goes against the road team, game ops are asked not to show a replay at all.

Teams have one challenge per game and, unlike in the NFL, if a call is overturned, a team doesn’t get the challenge back. “Our philosophy is to use it in high-leverage situations,” says Nathan Bubes, a Timberwolves assistant. Foul trouble, for example. Last spring, in Game 5 of Minnesota’s first-round series against Memphis, Karl-Anthony Towns was called for a charge after barreling into Jaren Jackson Jr. in the third quarter. Generally, T-Wolves coach Chris Finch prefers to hold on to his challenge until the fourth quarter. But the whistle was the fourth foul on Towns. Minnesota reviewed it, won and instead Jackson picked up his fourth foul and headed to the bench.

Golden State, similarly, likes to have its challenge available in the final minutes. Sometimes, says Warriors assistant Jama Mahlalela, there are “situational choices.” In Game 3 of the conference finals against Dallas, Andrew Wiggins was called for a charge after an acrobatic dunk on Luka Dončić midway through the fourth. “It didn’t quite fit our parameters for when to challenge,” says Mahlalela. But the moment—the dunk energized the team and gave the Warriors a 10-point lead—called for it. “I really didn’t know if we’d win it or not,” says Mahlalela. “But everything in that moment felt like we should try.” The challenge was successful; Golden State would win the game by nine.

Head coaches tell challenge guys: Be decisive. “Steve [Kerr] wants me to be clear,” says Mahlalela. “Thumbs up, challenge it. Thumbs down, don’t. He doesn’t really want anything else.” Adds Murphy, “It doesn’t help if everyone turns around and you’re like, ‘I don’t know, maybe?’ ”

Certain calls are easy. Coaches had a 74.7% success rate on out-of-bounds challenges last season. For goaltending, it was 78.6%. Most calls, though, are more difficult: Fouls were overturned just 43.9% of the time. The block/charge ranks

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CHALLENGE COACHES AREN’T SELECTED AS MUCH AS DRAFTED. ONE DAY, REYNOLDS, THEN BOSTON’S VIDEO COORDINATOR, RECEIVED A TEXT FROM BRAD STEVENS: “YOU HAVE TO BECOME AN EXPERT IN THE RULES.”

atop coaches' list of head scratchers. "Because it's hard for the referees, too," says Mahlalela. "Draymond [Green] is the king of it. He's always looking for [the charge]. And I'm always checking to see if he got all the way over." Calls involving verticality—whether a defensive player jumps straight up during a collision (which is legal) or is moving forward (which is not)—is another. "Refs can nitpick that one," says Sears. Shooting fouls, particularly on drives to the basket, can be complicated. "There are usually a lot of bodies in the way," says Murphy. "You don't know if another defender had a hand on the hip or if someone else bumped him first."

In tricky situations, a player becomes a resource. Though not always a reliable one. "We tell our guys, just be honest," says Bubes. In the NBA, though, nobody thinks they *ever* foul. "*Pathological liar* are not words I'd use," says Sears, laughing. "But every player thinks they are right." Challenge guys will track who usually is. "You keep a mental checklist of who has burned you," says Reynolds. "And who you might owe." Celtics big man Robert Williams III, says Reynolds, is "very honest." In Denver, Klask says if Nikola Jokić tells the bench he didn't commit the foul, "we're going to go with that."

Crossing star players occasionally is part of the job. Sears remembers—vividly—a regular-season game against Atlanta, where Dončić pleaded with Mavs coach Jason Kidd to challenge his fifth foul. When Kidd didn't, Dončić glared at Sears as he headed to the bench. "It's definitely nerve-racking, when a guy like that gets mad," says Sears. "But it comes with the territory."

THREE YEARS IN, the NBA has deemed its challenge system a success. The numbers have been stable. In the rule's first season, 2019–20, 633 calls were challenged, with 281 successful, an overturn rate of 44.4%. Last season, 719 calls were challenged, 346 successfully, a 48.1% overturn rate.

To address flow issues at the end of games, the league tweaked the rules last season, taking away referees' power to review out-of-bounds plays in the final two minutes and overtime, making them reviewable only by a coach's challenge. That, says NBA president of league operations Byron Spruell, reduced by 60% "outlier games," which the league defines as those in which the last two minutes take more than 18 minutes of real time. The league has also cracked down on some of the tricks teams have used to buy time—a lengthy shoe tie was a favorite—by slapping delay-of-game warnings and even technical fouls on offenders. "Overall we feel like it's really been a strategic part of the game that our coaches are truly using," says Spruell. "Each team I'm sure has its own view of how effective it's been. But we feel like everything's going in the right direction."

Challenge guys, for the most part, agree. Sure, it's stressful. Unsuccessful challenges can bring heat ("If I haven't won in a couple of games, I might hear about it," says Murphy), while uncalled ones can result in angry players. Several challenge guys commiserate on a group text, a form of digital therapy. But there's pride in the position. "Knowing I can impact the game, that's a cool thing," says Lumpkin.

And, as with anything else, an eagerness to get better. Some challenge guys have taken to scouting the referee crew chief, noting which are more reluctant to overturn their calls.

Where challenge guys mostly agree: *Don't give us any more of them*. A common gripe among head coaches is they get only one per game. "If they get the first one right," says Spruell, "they want the ability to use it again." That has sparked debate inside league offices.

"When I heard that," says Murphy, "I was like, 'I'm good.' One is plenty." Luckily for Murphy, Spruell says the league needs a few more years of data before it would consider that change.

And while being the challenge guy is a notable position, it's one many will be thrilled to be promoted out of. "I can't wait for the day I'm no longer doing this job," says Sears, smiling. "And I'm going to look back and put just as much pressure on the person behind me." □

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1. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED.
2. (ISSN: 511-820).
3. Filing date: 10/01/2022.
4. Issue frequency: Monthly.
5. Number of issues published annually: 12.
6. The annual subscription price is $65.
7. Complete mailing address of known office of publication: 200 Vesey St., 24th floor, New York, NY 10281.
8. Complete mailing address of headquarters or general business office of publisher: 200 Vesey St., 24th floor, New York, NY 10281.
9. Full names and complete mailing addresses of publisher, editor, and managing editor. Publisher, Melissa McCarthy, 200 Vesey St., 24th floor, New York, NY 10281; Editor, Ryan Hunt (Co-Editor in Chief), 200 Vesey St., 24th floor, New York, NY 10281; Managing Editor, Stephen Cannella (Co-Editor in Chief), 200 Vesey St., 24th floor, New York, NY 10281.
10. Owner: ABG-SI, LLC.; 1411 Broadway, 21st floor, New York, NY 10018.
11. Known bondholders, mortgages and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities: NONE.
12. Tax status: Has not changed during preceding 12 months.
13. Publisher title: SPORTS ILLUSTRATED.
14. Issue date for circulation data below: September 2022.
15. The extent and nature of circulation: **A.** Total number of copies printed (net press run). Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,356,070. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 1,153,589. **B.** Paid circulation. 1. Mailed outside-county paid subscriptions. Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 837,147. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 716,825. 2. Mailed in-county paid subscriptions. Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0. 3. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales. Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 11,857. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 8,749. 4. Paid distribution through other classes mailed through the USPS. Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0. **C.** Total paid distribution. Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 849,004. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 725,574. **D.** Free or nominal rate distribution (by mail and outside mail). 1. Free or nominal outside-county. Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 430,874. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 368,944. 2. Free or nominal rate in-county copies. Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0. 3. Free or nominal rate copies mailed at other classes through the USPS. Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0. 4. Free or nominal rate distribution outside the mail. Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 3,795. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 3,608. **E.** Total free or nominal rate distribution. Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 434,669. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 372,552. **F.** Total free distribution (sum of 15c and 15e). Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,283,673. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 1,098,126. **G.** Copies not distributed. Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 72,397. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 55,463. **H.** Total (sum of 15f and 15g). Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,356,070. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 1,153,589. **I.** Percent paid. Average percent of copies paid for preceding 12 months: 66.14%. Actual percent of copies paid for preceding 12 months: 66.07%.
16. Electronic copy circulation: **A.** Paid electronic copies. Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0. **B.** Total paid print copies (Line 15c) + paid electronic copies (Line 16a). Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 849,004. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 725,574. **C.** Total print distribution (Line 15f) + paid electronic copies (Line 16a). Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,283,673. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 1,098,126. **D.** Percent paid (both print and electronic copies) (16b divided by 16c x 100). Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 66.14%. Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 66.07%. I certify that 50% of all distributed copies (electronic and print) are paid above nominal price: YES. Report circulation on PS Form 3526-X worksheet.
17. Publication of statement of ownership will be printed in the November 2022 issue of the publication.
18. Signature and title of editor, publisher, business manager or owner: Stephen Cannella.

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BUCKS *over* CELTICS

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WARRIORS *over* BUCKS

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REPORTS

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This season, following the rebirth of an NBA dynasty, challengers to the throne have their work cut out for them. But hope abounds. Some contenders, like the Suns, are ready to avenge bitter playoff exits. Others, like the Clippers, are finally healthy and whole. Still, in the end, could it be the past two champions who decide it all?

SHOOTING STAR
Devin Booker is coming off his first All-NBA Team campaign after leading the Suns to 64 wins last season.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

ATLANTIC

An opposing scout sizes up the division

— ENEMY LINES —

I EXPECT THE Celtics to duplicate what they did last year. The ability to defend has such a strong correlation to getting into the Finals. . . . Their young pieces have not tapped out on their talent. Jayson Tatum is still getting better. So are Jaylen Brown and Grant Williams. . . . Robert Williams III turned their season around last year. His rim protection and lob threat were what they were missing. . . . Teams didn't game-plan for Boston last year because it wasn't seen as a contender until March. Now the Celtics will get everybody's best early on. That will be a big adjustment for a young team.

After reaching the Finals, Boston still has room for improvement, while the Nets have the most boom-bust potential in the league.

The **Nets** are probably the hardest team to predict in the NBA. We haven't had a chance to see Kevin Durant, Kyrie Irving and Ben Simmons play together. And how does Steve Nash coach this team after Durant's reported "him or me" demand this summer? Brooklyn could make the Finals or be a complete bomb. . . . I think Simmons is still an All-NBA–caliber player. If he was on the open market, would somebody give him a max deal? I think they would. In Brooklyn he is a perfect complement to the scoring talents they have.

The **Sixers** will be as good or as bad as the players they put around Joel Embiid and James Harden. . . . Their rotation guys mostly are who they are, but the x-factor is Tyrese Maxey. If he takes the same jump he made last year, he's a potential All-Star. But it will be hard for him to take that jump, because now he's a target. . . . P.J. Tucker is a great pickup from Miami. He adds toughness. . . . Harden is 33. I think he can still play at an All-Star level, but how many nights a year can he do that?

Other teams are led by stars, but I don't look at a single player on the **Raptors** roster and say, "That's the guy." I'm surprised by what they've been able to accomplish, but I'm also impressed. . . . Scottie Barnes could eventually become a much better version of Marcus Smart, with his ability to guard multiple positions and get stops, if he continues to grow at the offensive end. . . . Pascal Siakam is a guy I respect. How much better does he get? I think that's going to be the real key for Toronto.

Two years ago the **Knicks** did a very good job of getting their grit back. Last season they kind of lost some of it. . . . Adding Jalen Brunson does return grit to that team, but at a pretty high price [four years, $104 million]. Brunson was a great fit in Dallas alongside Luka Dončić. You never really know how it will go when you ask somebody to take on a bigger role like the Knicks are doing with Brunson, but does he make them better than they were last year? Yes. . . . I like RJ Barrett. Whether he turns into an All-Star, I don't know. He's a guy that does a lot of things well but maybe not one thing elite. ☐

DAVID E. KLUTHO (HARDEN); NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (NASH)

BACK WITH A VENGEANCE

James Harden G 76ERS

IN THE Sixers' second-round playoff loss to the Heat last season, James Harden looked old and ineffective, particularly in the games where Joel Embiid was out with injury. Now the former MVP, acquired at the trade deadline last year, is playing under a new contract that includes a $14.4 million pay cut—though, he has a chance to opt out and earn a new deal next year, which should give him extra motivation to shine in Philadelphia after messy breakups in Brooklyn and Houston.

The good news is Harden remains a deadly pick-and-roll threat. And GM Daryl Morey has brought in shooters, including ex-teammates Danuel House Jr. and P.J. Tucker, to help space the floor. The conditions are ripe for Harden to right his ship and, in the process, help Philly contend.

THE RUNDOWN

BOSTON CELTICS
TITLE ODDS +500 › **OVER/UNDER** 55.5

IN: MALCOLM BROGDON (T)
OUT: AARON NESMITH (T), DANIEL THEIS (T)

BROOKLYN NETS
TITLE ODDS +750 › **OVER/UNDER** 51.5

IN: T.J. WARREN (FA), ROYCE O'NEALE (T)
OUT: BRUCE BROWN (FA), ANDRE DRUMMOND (FA)

PHILADELPHIA 76ERS
TITLE ODDS +1400 › **OVER/UNDER** 50.5

IN: DE'ANTHONY MELTON (T), P.J. TUCKER (FA)
OUT: DANNY GREEN (T), DeANDRE JORDAN (FA)

TORONTO RAPTORS
TITLE ODDS +4000 › **OVER/UNDER** 45.5

IN: OTTO PORTER JR. (FA), D.J. WILSON (FA)
OUT: YUTA WATANABE (FA), SVI MYKHAILIUK (W)

NEW YORK KNICKS
TITLE ODDS +10000 › **OVER/UNDER** 38.5

IN: JALEN BRUNSON (FA), ISAIAH HARTENSTEIN (FA)
OUT: ALEC BURKS (T), KEMBA WALKER (T), TAJ GIBSON (FA)

BOLD PREDICTION: *Knicks collapse, miss playoffs. (O.K., maybe not bold.)*

AWARDS WATCH

COACH OF THE YEAR

STEVE NASH

NETS

▸ The Atlantic has given us three of the last five COY winners, and Boston's Ime Udoka had been the odds-on favorite. With him out of the running, consider Steve Nash: Yes, Brooklyn's season could blow up any time, but the talent is there for a huge year. **ODDS: +2000**

▸ **GOOD BETS** Chris Finch, MIN (+1000); Jason Kidd, DAL (+1200); Monty Williams, PHX (+1200); J.B. Bickerstaff, CLE (+1400)
▸ **LONG SHOT** Dwane Casey, DET (+2800)

CENTRAL

An opposing scout sizes up the division

— ENEMY LINES —

The Bucks' championship window may be closing, and the Cavs are coming on strong after their deal for Donovan Mitchell.

FOR THE Bucks, it's all about April and having people healthy for the playoffs. If Khris Middleton had been healthy last year, I think they would have won it all. . . . Their window is pretty slim right now, unless they find someone in the 25-year-old range who can play. . . . Do they have enough wings to take on Boston? You're putting a lot of pressure on Wes Matthews at 36 to guard Jaylen Brown or Jayson Tatum. . . . The biggest thing that could get them over the hump, that would make them unguardable, is if Giannis Antetokounmpo can make threes. . . . It seems like a make-or-break type year before they have to make significant changes.

Are Donovan Mitchell and Darius Garland a good fit on the **Cavaliers**? It's a legitimate concern, just like it would have been if Collin Sexton had come back. Except there's an innate hierarchy, because Mitchell has proved that he is better. . . . Mitchell and Garland are both high-usage players. Pace and extra possessions would help this team. . . . It's a smallish backcourt. But they have two pretty good young bigs, Evan Mobley and Jarrett Allen, to counter that. . . . Cleveland is still a notch below the Celtics and the Bucks.

The **Bulls** are interesting, but they don't have great depth. When Alex Caruso was out last season, they were not very good. . . . The key is Lonzo Ball's recovery from his knee injury. He makes everybody better. . . . DeMar DeRozan ended up carrying their team. I question whether, at 33, he can do that again. . . . Another question: Will Zach LaVine play the same now that he's gotten his max extension? . . . Nikola Vučević is trending down. He needs to hit 37% of his threes to be effective, because as a center he doesn't impact games defensively. . . . Even if they have a good year, they're still fifth in the East.

The **Pistons** have accumulated a lot of pieces. I'm not sure how well they all go together. They have a lot of guards who need the ball—Cade Cunningham, Jaden Ivey, Alec Burks, Kemba Walker. . . . I think Cade can lead them back to relevance. But it's important that he has better people around him. He's not the type of scorer who can go get you 30. He's more of a triple-double type player. . . . Size is an issue. I really like Isaiah Stewart, but he's a 6' 8½" center. . . . One guy to watch is Isaiah Livers. He can shoot, and he is tall [6' 7"] for a wing. . . . They'll play hard. Maybe next year they're where Cleveland was last year.

The **Pacers** are young; they're not very deep, and I don't know whether they're very good. . . . Tyrese Haliburton can be an important piece on a building team. But he's not Jayson Tatum; he's not that caliber. . . . Bennedict Mathurin will be good for them. He'll probably lead all rookies in scoring. . . . Will Myles Turner and Buddy Hield even be there after the trade deadline, if the Pacers are all in for the tank?

DAVID E. KLUTHO (ANTETOKOUNMPO); GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES (IVEY)

BACK WITH A VENGEANCE

Giannis Antetokounmpo F BUCKS

PERHAPS THE biggest what-if team from last year's playoffs, the Bucks pushed the Celtics to seven games despite playing the entire series without three-time All-Star Khris Middleton, thanks to a heroic effort from two-time MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo.

This season it's clear the 2020–21 champs will rely heavily on the Greek Freak to bring them back to the mountaintop. For a contender, the Bucks had a relatively quiet offseason. Their major addition was former Jazz man Joe Ingles, a cagey defender and knowledgeable vet who could add some much-needed creativity on the wing. The concerns are Ingles's age (35) and health (he's coming off a torn ACL). Still, even with a creaky supporting cast, Milwaukee no doubt deserves to be feared because of a motivated Antetokounmpo alone.

THE RUNDOWN

MILWAUKEE BUCKS
TITLE ODDS +650 › **OVER/UNDER** 53.5

IN: JOE INGLES (FA), MARJON BEAUCHAMP (D)
OUT: NONE

CLEVELAND CAVALIERS
TITLE ODDS +3300 › **OVER/UNDER** 46.5

IN: DONOVAN MITCHELL (T), RAUL NETO (FA)
OUT: COLLIN SEXTON (T), LAURI MARKKANEN (T)

CHICAGO BULLS
TITLE ODDS +6000 › **OVER/UNDER** 44.5

IN: ANDRE DRUMMOND (FA), GORAN DRAGIĆ (FA)
OUT: TROY BROWN JR. (FA)

DETROIT PISTONS
TITLE ODDS +50000 › **OVER/UNDER** 28.5

IN: ALEC BURKS (T), KEMBA WALKER (T), JADEN IVEY (D)
OUT: JERAMI GRANT (T), LUKA GARZA (FA)

INDIANA PACERS
TITLE ODDS +30000 › **OVER/UNDER** 23.5

IN: BENNEDICT MATHURIN (D), DANIEL THEIS (T)
OUT: MALCOLM BROGDON (T), T.J. WARREN (FA)

BOLD PREDICTION: *The Cavs win their first playoff series in five years.*

AWARDS WATCH

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

JADEN IVEY

G PISTONS

▸ The rookie race opened up when OKC's Chet Holmgren was lost for the year. Though not the favorite, Jaden Ivey will have his opportunities, alongside 2022 ROY finalist Cade Cunningham, on a team that's going all in on youth.
ODDS: +500

▸ **GOOD BETS** PF Paolo Banchero, ORL (+200); PF Keegan Murray, SAC (+500); PF Jabari Smith Jr., HOU (+600)
▸ **LONG SHOT** PF Tari Eason, HOU (+9000)

SOUTHEAST

An opposing scout sizes up the division

— ENEMY LINES —

THE Heat HAVEN'T done very much to improve their team. They have good talent and an excellent coach, but they don't have enough firepower to make the Finals. . . . Kyle Lowry was not in good shape last year. They gave him all that money [$90 million over three years] and let him get away with it. . . . Without P.J. Tucker, who is their power forward? Is it Caleb Martin? They don't really have one on the roster. . . . No doubt they overvalued Duncan Robinson at $18 million a year. He's one-dimensional. Max Strus is better. . . . If Victor Oladipo can regain his old productivity, he could make a difference.

The **Hawks'** trade for Dejounte Murray is obviously key. Their perimeter defense was terrible. Now you have a guy who can guard. Taking Trae Young off the ball and helping him defensively is big. . . . Now they have some defensive guys—Clint Capela, De'Andre Hunter, Moe Harkless and Murray. They need a critical mass of defenders, because Trae is really bad. . . . Will they contend? No, but they're gonna be a tough out.

Except for Miami and Atlanta, the teams in this division offer little in the way of star power—just various levels of mediocrity.

Why did the **Hornets** fire their coach? They won 43 games! With that roster, James Borrego did a good job. You're gonna extract more blood out of a stone with Steve Clifford? . . . He's a star offensively, but LaMelo Ball has got to play a little more under control. His defense is horrendous. . . . Miles Bridges was key to whatever success they had last year. Without him [Bridges's future is uncertain following domestic violence charges], they'll take a step back. . . . Terry Rozier is a very good player. But all the other guys are either marginal or complementary.

I like the Monte Morris acquisition by the **Wizards**. He never turns it over, makes open threes and he's a pass-first point guard. . . . If Kristaps Porziņģis is not healthy, their talent is very ordinary. . . . Bradley Beal's supermax extension was obviously a bad deal. He didn't play that well last year, and he was hurt. Is he your No.1 guy on a championship team? No. He's a very good player. But if Beal wanted out, wouldn't he have gotten out? I guess he's happy losing and being the guy. . . . Deni Avdija's defense is pretty good. He's a glue kind of guy, though, not a lot of upside there.

The **Magic** are the worst team in the NBA over the last five years. They don't have enough talent. They don't have anything close to stars. . . . I found Paolo Banchero a little underwhelming this summer. He's not a great shooter. He's a good passer, big body, not that athletic. A little trouble getting separation. But he could be their best player, which says it all. . . . Who's the point guard? Is it Markelle Fultz, Cole Anthony, Jalen Suggs? Suggs was terrible last season, but he had an injury. . . . Maybe in a few years they are a playoff team. ☐

GREG NELSON (YOUNG); ISSAC BALDIZON/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (ADEBAYO)

BACK WITH A VENGEANCE

Trae Young PG HAWKS

THE HAWKS never seemed to get off the ground last season, with injuries to John Collins, De'Andre Hunter and Onyeka Okongwu making it hard for the team to build off its run to the 2021 conference finals. Atlanta eventually stumbled into the first round via the play-in, but Trae Young was stifled by the Heat defense, averaging 15.4 points in the five-game loss—a far cry from his 28.8 playoff average the year before.

Atlanta's front office made a big swing this summer, trading multiple first-round picks for All-Star Dejounte Murray. The team is hoping that adding ballhandling and defense will ease the burden on its high-usage offensive wizard. To thrive this year, Young will have to prove he can both coexist with another backcourt star and that he can repeat his previous postseason success.

THE RUNDOWN

MIAMI HEAT
TITLE ODDS +1400 › **OVER/UNDER** 49.5

IN: NIKOLA JOVIĆ (D)
OUT: P.J. TUCKER (FA), MARKIEFF MORRIS (FA)

ATLANTA HAWKS
TITLE ODDS +4500 › **OVER/UNDER** 45.5

IN: DEJOUNTE MURRAY (T), JUSTIN HOLIDAY (T)
OUT: DANILO GALLINARI (T), KEVIN HUERTER (T)

CHARLOTTE HORNETS
TITLE ODDS +15000 › **OVER/UNDER** 37.5

IN: MARK WILLIAMS (D), BRYCE McGOWENS (D)
OUT: NONE

WASHINGTON WIZARDS
TITLE ODDS +30000 › **OVER/UNDER** 35.5

IN: WILL BARTON (T), MONTE MORRIS (T)
OUT: KENTAVIOUS CALDWELL-POPE (T), ISH SMITH (T)

ORLANDO MAGIC
TITLE ODDS +50000 › **OVER/UNDER** 26.5

IN: PAOLO BANCHERO (D), CALEB HOUSTAN (D)
OUT: ROBIN LOPEZ (FA)

BOLD PREDICTION: *Miami goes from top seed to not having home court.*

AWARDS WATCH

DEFENSIVE POY

BAM ADEBAYO

C HEAT

▸ After Boston's Marcus Smart struck a blow for the little guys last year by becoming the first point guard to win the award since 1996, the focus will be back on the big men—including Miami's rangy rim protector, Bam Adebayo.
ODDS: +700

▸ **GOOD BETS** C Rudy Gobert, MIN (+400); C Robert Williams III, BOS (+650); PF Giannis Antetokounmpo, MIL (+800)
▸ **LONG SHOT** SF Kawhi Leonard, LAC (+2200)

NORTHWEST

An opposing scout sizes up the division

— ENEMY LINES —

THE **Nuggets** **START** with Nikola Jokić, who is still the best passing big, or best passer period, maybe, in the league. He finds everybody. . . . If Jamal Murray is healthy, he projects as an All-Star. Their two-man game is really hard to guard. . . . Bones Hyland showed some flashes as a rookie, but he had a habit of playing selfishly. He's going to get more time with Monte Morris gone, but he's going to have to change his game. . . . Michael Porter Jr. is a very good scorer and an awful defender. He'll fire off dumb shots and make them—he's that good. If he can stay healthy, the Nuggets are as good as any team in the conference.

Karl-Anthony Towns and Rudy Gobert will be fine together for the **Timberwolves**. The question is, are you willing to put $42 million in Gobert [who was acquired from the Jazz] on the bench in the last six minutes of close games? There will be nights when that should happen, and Gobert will not be happy. But I think Chris Finch will do what he has to do. . . . D'Angelo Russell is a wild card. He's in a contract year, so maybe two out of every four games, they get a good DLo. . . . Anthony Edwards looks like a star. But they have to get him to value possessions more. Dude, there are four minutes left; you're down five with 16 on the clock. Why'd you just dribble into a step back?

The Utah-Minnesota trade will shift the balance of power, even if the new lineup poses a dilemma for the T-Wolves.

I'm less enthusiastic about the **Blazers** adding Jerami Grant than most. I just don't think he's very good. Portland probably felt the move would help entice Damian Lillard to stay. . . . I guess it's saying Anfernee Simons and Lillard are both big-time scorers and ballhandlers. Maybe Portland is a little bit better this year, but probably it's about the same.

I would be excited about Josh Giddey if I were the **Thunder**. He was a pretty damn good passer as a rookie. . . . Shai Gilgeous-Alexander knows how to score. But on defense, you can go at him. To me, Shai and [new Cavs guard] Donovan Mitchell are two guys who could defend but didn't give the effort last year. But again, if the organizational mandate is to lose every game, how can Shai be expected to kill himself? . . . Lu Dort is a very good complementary player. Defensively he can turn it into a football game and beat the s--- out of guys and not have anything get called.

Danny Ainge wants his teams to be either really good or really bad. This **Jazz** team looks really bad. They will bring in a bunch of young guys, and if one of them hits, great. If not, move on. . . . I'm not a Collin Sexton guy. He and Jordan Clarkson are similar, not in how they play, but in their role as scorers. Still, Utah took the right offer for Mitchell. I'd rather pay Sexton $72 million for four years than RJ Barrett $120 million for four years. □

DAVID SHERMAN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (GOBERT); JORDAN JOHNSON/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (EDWARDS)

BACK WITH A VENGEANCE

Rudy Gobert C TIMBERWOLVES

RUDY GOBERT is a Rorschach test for NBA fans. Do they see a center whose impact wanes in the postseason? Or a generational defensive talent who has been failed by his teammates? Gobert will have a fresh chance to quiet his doubters after Utah sent him to Minnesota in July for a package that included five first-round picks.

In Utah, Gobert was in a tough spot. His rim-protecting skills mattered less because he was often drawn outside by his team's poor perimeter defense, and his offensive influence never matched his salary. The T-Wolves may have even more scoring talent than the Jazz did, but Gobert will face new pressure, too. Minnesota gave up so much in the hope that he will lift the team to the next level. The playoffs are when Gobert will either answer his critics or prove them right.

THE RUNDOWN

DENVER NUGGETS
TITLE ODDS +1800 › **OVER/UNDER** 50.5

IN: KENTAVIOUS CALDWELL-POPE (T), BRUCE BROWN (FA)
OUT: WILL BARTON (T), MONTE MORRIS (T), AUSTIN RIVERS (FA)

MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES
TITLE ODDS +3300 › **OVER/UNDER** 47.5

IN: RUDY GOBERT (T), BRYN FORBES (FA), LUKA GARZA (FA)
OUT: PATRICK BEVERLEY (T), MALIK BEASLEY (T)

PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS
TITLE ODDS +8000 › **OVER/UNDER** 39.5

IN: JERAMI GRANT (T), SHAEDON SHARPE (D)
OUT: CJ ELLEBY (FA)

OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER
TITLE ODDS +15000 › **OVER/UNDER** 23.5

IN: OUSMANE DIENG (D), JALEN WILLIAMS (D)
OUT: ISAIAH ROBY (W)

UTAH JAZZ
TITLE ODDS +50000 › **OVER/UNDER** 25.5

IN: COLLIN SEXTON (T), LAURI MARKKANEN (T)
OUT: DONOVAN MITCHELL (T), RUDY GOBERT (T)

BOLD PREDICTION: *Tanking Jazz edge Thunder for top lottery spot.*

AWARDS WATCH

MOST IMPROVED

ANTHONY EDWARDS

SG TIMBERWOLVES

▸ In his first time on the postseason stage, Anthony Edwards nearly led Minnesota past No. 2 Memphis, averaging 25.2 ppg. Now with even more talent around him, Edwards is looking at a third-year jump that could put him into the league's elite.
ODDS: +1100

▸ **GOOD BETS** PG Tyrese Haliburton, IND (+1100); PG Jalen Brunson, NYK (+1800); SF RJ Barrett, NYK (+2000)
▸ **LONG SHOT** PG Ben Simmons, BKN (+4000)

SOUTHWEST

An opposing scout sizes up the division

— ENEMY LINES —

Several of these teams have exciting young stars, while others are positioning themselves to draft one next summer.

I THINK THE Grizzlies take a little bit of a step back. They rely a lot on offensive rebounding and transition. If the West as a whole is better, it becomes harder to win that way. . . . Jaren Jackson Jr. is a good, not great, player. On defense he fouls a ton. . . . Dillon Brooks is too much of a wild card. It looks like they made an agreement with him that was like, "We'll let you take any of the crazy shots you want, as long as you guard." . . . Defensively, Ja Morant is absolute horses---. I mean atrocious. He's as bad as any big-time NBA player you will find. But offensively, he gets where he wants, and that's big. His three-point shooting was better last year, and if it continues to improve he will be an MVP candidate. His attitude and energy are something that they all feed off.

Who is the **Mavericks'** second-best player? Last year it was Jalen Brunson. Now who is it? Christian Wood? I think he's an empty-numbers guy. Is it Spencer Dinwiddie? I don't know if you can bet on him. . . . They need Josh Green to make a jump. And for a little while last year he did, but he hit a slump and then he didn't get any more touches. . . . There's no Big Three. There's a Big One. And so there's a lot of pressure on Luka Dončić. He's pretty damn good, but I don't know how far he can take them.

For the **Pelicans**, Zion Williamson looks like a star. A guy who went up against him told us Zion was like a battering ram hitting him in the chest. The question is, what is a realistic number of games for him? 55? 60? . . . CJ McCollum was a big get last year. You could tell his professionalism rubbed off on them. . . . Herb Jones was good defensively, but he's not a great shooter. Zion's not a great shooter. CJ doesn't really shoot threes off the catch. The spacing is not going to be great.

The **Rockets** are going to stink. Again. Their spacing was horrendous last season. Their willingness to pass was terrible. Their defense stunk. . . . Jabari Smith Jr. can help defensively right away. On offense, he has that high release that makes his shot impossible to get to. If he starts making them, he could surprise people early. . . . If I were them, I'd get Kevin Porter Jr. out of there and say, "Hey, Jalen Green and Smith, we're going to roll with you guys. Hey, Stephen Silas, your job as coach is to make those two guys better. Then we're going to get a top-five pick again next year. And then we're going to say, 'These are our three guys.' "

The **Spurs** have a half dozen guys you kind of like, but nobody that you love. This is a team built to get a high draft pick. I mean, Doug McDermott is their highest-paid player. . . . Keldon Johnson started out wild last year but played more under control by the end. He could be the fourth or fifth starter on a good team. ▫

BACK WITH A VENGEANCE

Ja Morant PG GRIZZLIES

THOUGH THE Grizzlies thrived without Ja Morant during the season, their luck ran out in the playoffs, when Memphis was eliminated by the Warriors in six games in the second round. (Morant missed the last three contests with a knee injury.) The reigning Most Improved Player averaged 38.3 points per game in his first conference semis, and based on the tweet he made at Draymond Green after the teams' Christmas matchup was announced—"we got what we wanted dray"—it's clear Morant feels the series should have ended differently.

Memphis is undoubtedly exciting, but this year could be tough. Jaren Jackson Jr. is expected to miss a few months after foot surgery, and key rotation pieces Kyle Anderson and De'Anthony Melton are gone. Morant may have to find another level to keep the Grizzlies in the mix in a loaded West.

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (MORANT); JIM COWSERT/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (DONCIC)

THE RUNDOWN

MEMPHIS GRIZZLIES

TITLE ODDS +2000 › **OVER/UNDER** 48.5

IN: DANNY GREEN (T), JAKE LaRAVIA (D), DAVID RODDY (D)
OUT: KYLE ANDERSON (FA), DE'ANTHONY MELTON (T)

DALLAS MAVERICKS

TITLE ODDS +2000 › **OVER/UNDER** 48.5

IN: CHRISTIAN WOOD (T), JaVALE McGEE (FA)
OUT: JALEN BRUNSON (FA), TREY BURKE (T)

NEW ORLEANS PELICANS

TITLE ODDS +4000 › **OVER/UNDER** 43.5

IN: DYSON DANIELS (D), E.J. LIDDELL (D)
OUT: NONE

HOUSTON ROCKETS

TITLE ODDS +50000 › **OVER/UNDER** 23.5

IN: JABARI SMITH JR. (D), TREY BURKE (T), TARI EASON (D)
OUT: CHRISTIAN WOOD (T), JOHN WALL (W)

SAN ANTONIO SPURS

TITLE ODDS +40000 › **OVER/UNDER** 22.5

IN: JEREMY SOCHAN (D), ISAIAH ROBY (FA)
OUT: DEJOUNTE MURRAY (T), LONNIE WALKER IV (FA)

BOLD PREDICTION: *Zion leads the Pels to first winning record since 2018.*

AWARDS WATCH

MVP

LUKA DONČIĆ

PG MAVERICKS

‣ Bad news for Nikola Jokić: MVP voters don't like threepeats. (It hasn't happened since Larry Bird in the mid-1980s.) That opens the door for the current holder of the best-player-to-never-win-MVP title, the Mavs' Luka Dončić.
ODDS: +450

‣ **GOOD BETS** C Joel Embiid, PHI (+500); PF Giannis Antetokounmpo, MIL (+550); SF Kevin Durant, BKN (+900)
‣ **LONG SHOT** PF Zion Williamson, NOP (+4000)

PACIFIC

An opposing scout sizes up the division

— ENEMY LINES —

AGE IS REALLY the only question with the **Warriors**. They have all the pieces to be great again. [34-year-old] Steph Curry's game will age well. He'll be an All-Star for years. . . . When Klay Thompson came back from his injuries last year, he wasn't close to the defender he used to be. I don't know how far back he will get this year, but he's still pretty athletic and a pretty damn good shooter. . . . It will be interesting to see how much their young guys help them. Moses Moody can shoot it, and he guards. Jonathan Kuminga can play, though he looks like he thinks he's at a level that he's not quite at yet.

Steph and the defending champions should come back strong, but this group of teams is rich with potential contenders.

The **Suns** will be fine in the regular season, but was last year's playoffs implosion a warning sign? . . . They didn't want to pay Deandre Ayton, but he's very effective and can get better. They may not like his attitude. He may not like being there. But he's a great finisher and scorer around the rim. I think they should give him more touches in the regular season. . . . Their bench disappeared in the playoffs, and Phoenix didn't do much to address that. It matters because they have to manage Chris Paul's minutes this year at age 37.

If the **Clippers** have everybody back in top form, they are the best team in the conference. Kawhi Leonard and Paul George can make shots from all different areas and have great size. George has really improved as a playmaker. Kawhi can defend anyone. . . . Let's see how healthy John Wall is. If he is what he was in Houston two years ago, his pickup doesn't help much. But if he is athletic enough to get in the paint and to defend, he can be good for them.

I really don't know how the **Lakers** can make Russell Westbrook and Patrick Beverley work in the backcourt. There's legitimate hatred there. That'll be a challenge for rookie coach Darvin Ham. . . . Offensively LeBron James continues to be really strong, but [at age 37] he can't play high minutes at both ends anymore. He can still be a top player, but I don't think he can win the way he would prefer, with the ball in his hands every play. . . . Anthony Davis had a bunch of bad misses last year. To me that says he wasn't practicing a whole lot. And he looked heavy. That's tough, if you're injury prone and heavy.

For the **Kings**, De'Aaron Fox and Domantas Sabonis both have talent, but neither has been able to maximize it. You saw some signs of chemistry late last season, after they picked up Sabonis from Indiana. How those two mesh will determine how good Sacramento will be. . . . I like the Kings' top pick, Keegan Murray. At 6' 8" he's got good size, good shotmaking and good decision-making. He looks like he'll be a solid, versatile player. They can slide him to the four. They could even play him as a small five for a few minutes.

JAMIE SCHWABEROW (PAUL); MIKE RASAY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (POOLE)

BACK WITH A VENGEANCE

Chris Paul PG SUNS

IN A career filled with playoff disappointments, Chris Paul suffered arguably his most bewildering in May, when the Mavericks trounced his top-seeded Suns 123–90 at home in Game 7 of the second round. The loss was so complete it sparked rumors: Was Paul sick? Did he have an undisclosed injury?

After the first two games against Dallas, Paul's play took a precipitous dip that coincided with his 37th birthday. This loss also unfortunately echoed the 2021 Finals, when the Suns blew a 2–0 lead against the Bucks.

At his age Paul is running out of chances to show that he can come through in the postseason. Because Phoenix is running it back this year with largely the same roster, the pressure will fall on the Point God to rewrite his own narrative.

THE RUNDOWN

GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS
TITLE ODDS +600 › **OVER/UNDER** 52.5

IN: DONTE DIVINCENZO (FA), JAMYCHAL GREEN (FA)
OUT: OTTO PORTER JR. (FA), DAMION LEE (FA), GARY PAYTON II (FA)

PHOENIX SUNS
TITLE ODDS +800 › **OVER/UNDER** 53.5

IN: DUANE WASHINGTON JR. (FA), DAMION LEE (FA)
OUT: JAVALE MCGEE (FA), AARON HOLIDAY (FA)

LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS
TITLE ODDS +700 › **OVER/UNDER** 52.5

IN: JOHN WALL (FA)
OUT: ISAIAH HARTENSTEIN (FA)

LOS ANGELES LAKERS
TITLE ODDS +1400 › **OVER/UNDER** 45.5

IN: PATRICK BEVERLEY (T), LONNIE WALKER IV (FA)
OUT: MALIK MONK (FA), TALEN HORTON-TUCKER (T)

SACRAMENTO KINGS
TITLE ODDS +40000 › **OVER/UNDER** 33.5

IN: MALIK MONK (FA), KEEGAN MURRAY (D)
OUT: MAURICE HARKLESS (T), DAMIAN JONES (FA)

BOLD PREDICTION: *LeBron's playoff drought hits two years with play-in L.*

AWARDS WATCH

SIXTH MAN OF THE YEAR

JORDAN POOLE

SG WARRIORS

- After starting in the Dubs' first-round win over the Nuggets, Jordan Poole was moved to the bench. Was he fazed? Nope. He scored 31 points in Game 1 against the Grizzlies and then anchored the second unit for the rest of Golden State's title run. **ODDS: +450**

- **GOOD BETS** SG Tyler Herro, MIA (+500); PG Malcolm Brogdon, BOS (+850); SG Anfernee Simons, POR (+1400)
- **LONG SHOT** PF Kevin Love, CLE (+2500)

BY GREG BISHOP

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT JOHNSON/ GETTY IMAGES

The Full

SPALDING
HACKMAN
11
14

WCC
GONZAGA
2
ZAGS

Experience

It's hoops—and 'stache—season, which means it's time for **DREW TIMME** to spread more of his unique style of joy as the skilled big man tries to lead Gonzaga to the ultimate celebration

BRIAN ROTHMULLER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

LAST SPRING, at a biology class on the Spokane River, Gonzaga basketballers Drew Timme and Anton Watson encountered a tall-person problem: They could not find lab-issued boots large enough for their gargantuan feet. Timme, because he is Timme, crammed his size-18 human snowshoes halfway into the biggest pair available, then skipped down to the banks, which were lined with trees and rock formations, dark-blue water sparkling in the sun.

The man and his majestic mustache then waded into the water to hunt for insects and frogs. Suddenly, Watson spied a crawfish, which he plucked and held high. Timme began cheering. Timme led a chant. Timme recoiled in mock horror as Watson placed the still-crawling crustacean onto his neck.

This is Timme, elite and authentic, hilarious and self-deprecating, normal and, well, not normal. Teammates describe similar daily interactions, always strange, as the Full Drew Experience (FDE), and they begin such descriptions with head shakes and giggles that make his mom, Megan, cringe. “I’m worried it could resonate like an episode of *Jackass*,” she says. “I mean, just totally ridiculous.”

The FDE starts with that ’stache, much to mom’s chagrin. It’s more than a ’stache; it’s a mission statement. The first time Timme told Watson he planned to trim his beard into a handlebar, Watson slapped palm to forehead. But the internet went bananas, forcing Drew to just go with it. Watson shrugs. “People like it,” he says. Another shrug. “I guess,” he spits out.

Because he is Timme, there’s an art to shaping the ’stache. It begins with a single simple rule: no soul patch. (He’s not a monster!) He’ll grow out a full beard, tire of it, then follow his instincts—but not before announcing to friends that “stache szn” has commenced. Some days, he feels like a copstache; others, a goatee; others, the famous

THE FULL DREW EXPERIENCE IS HEADBANDS. IT'S WWE-STYLE CELEBRATIONS. IT'S FUN. SELF-AWARE. IT HAS TIMME SPARKING CONVERSATIONS WITH OPPOSING COACHES... DURING WARMUPS.

Drew Manchu. "Always want to give it a little more pop," Timme says.

Speaking of: The proclamations, methodology and designs that border on artwork are part of a loose plan that's genius (and haphazard) (and charming). Timme is the rare college basketball star with modest NBA prospects, and he somehow managed to turn facial hair into a brand and an ethos. It explains him as well as anything explains anyone. "Just pure energy," teammate Rasir Bolton says.

It has also made Timme—auburn-haired, strapping, dripping sweat—a meme and the subject of (mostly) light-hearted mockery. Comparisons abound. Relief pitcher near the end. Middle-aged plumber. Hockey goon. Mall cop. Jackie Moon, the singer/player/team owner played by Will Ferrell in *Semi-Pro*.

Timme is, as Dollar Shave Club declared in one endorsement, sports' most celebrated "chin-fluencer."

Because this is Timme, no one considers his perch at the rare intersection of 'stache and sports all that unusual. Not for a forward who spent this summer watching—*sorry, Mom!*—every *Jackass* movie, giggling at the nut shots and studying the acting. Not for a dude who creates personalized routines for his pregame introduction, an amalgam of fist bumps, headbutts, chest bumps, thumb wars and handshakes that can include everyone from a ball boy to Zags coach Mark Few.

The FDE is headbands. WWE-style celebrations after baskets. It's fun. Self-aware. It's an inquisitiveness that sees Timme sparking conversations with opposing coaches . . . during warmups. He loves Dos Equis—because, of course he does. He is the most interesting man in college basketball.

Why does any of this matter? Because Timme is also Gonzaga basketball, from where it started, to how it's going, to the one thing he's trying to shape above all else: the only thing the Zags have never won.

A**S DREW TIMME** ambles toward an interview in early September, his presence is announced from 100 yards away. Timme laughs. Timme shouts. Timme cackles. Because he is Timme, an entrance must be made.

At his essence, this is Timme: pure, unadulterated, injectable joy bottled into a lumpy, towering body. The 'stache is his spigot, spreading unbridled enthusiasm throughout his world and far beyond. He describes the FDE like this: *I love what I do. And the way I play, it's an extension of me. It's who I am.*

This matters because he is Timme, a distinct headliner for college basketball's most unlikely power. Gonzaga is a small school in a remote location. But that hasn't stopped expectations from ballooning beyond what's reasonable. Winning is both demanded and taken for granted in Spokane. It has looked so easy, especially in Timme's first three seasons, when the Zags went 90–7. Or in 2020–21, when they nearly completed an undefeated year, their lone defeat coming to Baylor in the national title game. Timme is a two-time All-American, the reigning West Coast Conference Player of the Year and one of the country's most productive big men. But what might seem easy most definitely is not. "People don't realize how hard it really is," he says.

Inside the crucible of demand and intensity that is Gonzaga basketball, even small booster shots of Timme-brand joy stretch far beyond his wingspan. They strengthen team dynamics, ward off negativity and make an enterprise that's basically big business feel less heavy.

– By Jeremy Woo –

Even then, the FDE wasn't always this way. Growing up in the Dallas suburb of Richardson, a 6' 10" high schooler who couldn't yet grow a mustache. He cared too much and tried too hard. "Serious and scared," Timme says of his younger self. When told he wasn't good enough or tough enough by a youth coach, Timme responded by maximizing his gifts. The connection he made—that sports should, ultimately, be fun—only made him a better player. He vowed to never lose that vibe again.

Matt and Megan Timme raised three children—each tall, each an athlete, each so competitive they still vociferously claim the coveted title of Timme tic-tac-toe champion. In this forest of a family, Matt played hoops at SMU, where he studied psychology, and later competed in Europe. Megan, a college tennis player at Stephen F. Austin, became an educator in Richardson, where she's now on the school district's board of trustees. Son Walker, the middle child, is a freshman forward at McNeese State. Daughter Kendall, the youngest, is a high school volleyball prospect.

They all know Drew as the world came to understand him: "Just so goofy and dumb," Megan says, as a *compliment*. But they also knew the Drew that actively made the FDE possible. That Drew showed up at practices for Drive Nation—the AAU program started by former NBA All-Star Jermaine O'Neal—in Uggs and cut-off T-shirts before turning laughter into awe. Timme sought extra time with O'Neal, peppering him with questions about footwork and positioning.

Eventually, Gonzaga assistant Brian Michaelson called to invite Timme for an official visit. And, Timme being Timme, he fell in love, though not for the obvious reason. It wasn't just that he was enamored with basketball, all the banners hanging in the practice facility Few built. Hoops mattered, of course—but not as much as how normal everything felt on campus. "I want *that*," he told his parents, meaning: rubbery cafeteria spaghetti, cramped dorm rooms and no sports silos. Not to mention Few, the coach who never left and never planned to, the teacher with more seasons coaching at Gonzaga (23) than candles on Timme's last birthday cake (22).

"He always finds his value, his niche," Megan says. "That's what we always taught him. This is your job: being a good human being."

Her son—a human being currently in good standing everywhere except on campus at rival BYU—didn't lack for scholarship offers. Michigan State. Texas. Arizona. Texas A&M. Drew made a pivotal choice in 2019. He picked Gonzaga, the perfect incubator for a brand he didn't know existed yet. He chose joy, because he is Timme.

BIG MEN ON CAMPUS:
NOW MORE THAN EVER

▸ **HAS ANYONE** noticed that this year's short list of college stars skews large? That's because of two factors: One is the NBA's continuing evolution away from traditional, back-to-the-basket centers. The other is the new NIL rules that have funneled money into the pockets of enterprising college athletes. Big men may not be the hot commodities they once were in the NBA—a mere four college centers were selected in June. But they have learned that by staying in school and cashing in on NIL opportunities, they can still be paid like stars.

Take, for example, Timme, Kentucky's **Oscar Tshiebwe**,

KENTUCKY
34

JORDAN PRATHER/USA TODAY SPORTS

TIMME GOT HIS slice of normal. Gonzaga, in return, got normal's antithesis. It didn't take long for Few to bestow his *Jackass*-loving forward with a new moniker, as Timme became Gonzaga's "union rep." This owed to Timme's myriad (but friendly) complaints to management. Like whenever practice ran a little long. Or when Mount Few threatened to erupt.

Timme's parents had worried his personality might be naturally dulled in college. They were wrong. "Drew's gonna be Drew, right?" Matt says. And that, in fact, was exactly what Gonzaga wanted. Not subdued Drew. Not clean-shaven Drew. Only the FDE would do, which spoke to the culture that Few had nurtured for more than two decades.

Most programs deploy *culture* as a buzzword—like junk food, it's empty calories. Not the Zags. Few certainly didn't design the spirit of Gonzaga basketball with Timme in mind. But he did fashion a hoops laboratory that celebrated individuality, welcoming all types, from all over the world. If that meant the 59-year-old coach chest-bumping the mustachioed baller during intros, so be it. "He's got a low center of gravity," Timme explains with a smirk.

His evolution started immediately.

Year 1: Surprisingly productive freshman season. Spent backing up the conference player of the year, Filip Petrusev, along with spot starts whenever Killian Tillie missed time. Too much fun off the court. Not enough fun on it, as the postseason was canceled with the No. 2 Zags sitting at 31–2. Blame COVID-19.

Year 2: Unexpected star turn. Petrusev, a native of Serbia, decided to stay and play in his homeland. Forward Corey Kispert and shooting guard Joel Ayayi returned, while future NBA lottery pick Jalen Suggs arrived. Timme grabbed onto a larger role. He set screens. He slid into space. He galloped—as much as someone who's built like him can gallop—down the floor in transition. After averaging 19.0 points and 7.0 rebounds per game, Timme did not jump to the NBA, a decision he explains in five words. "I just like kicking ass."

Year 3: The takeover. Suggs left. But in came Chet Holmgren, a 7' 1" center known as The Unicorn. Consider Holmgren—a serious player ticketed for stardom from an early age—and Timme the world's tallest yin and yang. Gonzaga became less perimeter-oriented, while Timme waded deeper into the post.

Travis Knight, the school's strength and conditioning coach, came to believe everyone could follow Timme toward the rarest of places: happiness. The kindergarten mentality his coaches described wasn't an insult. Yes, dealing with children that young is frustrating. But strip away busy schedules and endless workweeks and so much self-induced stress: Most adults would love nothing more than to return to that state. Because he is Timme, he lives there, population 1½. Just a man and his mustache, shaping and smiling through another season.

Which leads to the intersection of his joy and competitive nature: moves shaped by sweat

The NBA's increasingly perimeter-oriented offenses have led to traditional centers staying in school longer, potentially adding a throwback element to the game

North Carolina's Armando Bacot and Indiana's Trayce Jackson-Davis. These seniors all considered turning pro but then returned to anchor iconic programs, incentivized by endorsement money that can rival or even surpass what they would make on a two-way NBA contract or G League deal. *The Athletic* reported in August that Tshiebwe—last year's unanimous National Player of the Year—has already earned close to $2.75 million from NIL.

Decades ago NCAA basketball was characterized by rivalries that played out across seasons—think of Patrick Ewing, Ralph Sampson and Hakeem Olajuwon in the early 1980s. Those sorts of continuing story lines have all but disappeared in the age of one-and-dones and instant transfers, with prospects moving as soon as the audience gets to know them. While not every big man will linger—star center Kofi Cockburn left Illinois, went undrafted and signed an Exhibit 10 deal with Utah, hoping to catch on with that organization—the prospect of schools building around blue-chip centers for multiple years, rather than flashier perimeter recruits, has to hold some appeal for college coaches, and for fans of the game. ◻

equity, deployed with an enthusiasm normally reserved for train sets and Santa Claus. Those moves . . . they *have* moves. Jab steps and long strides; spins and pivots and pump-fakes and flying elbows; baby hooks and skyhooks and jump hooks; up-and-unders and crossovers and fadeaways.

Proof came in last year's NCAA tournament, in a second-round clash with ninth-seeded Memphis. After the Tigers shot to a 10-point lead at halftime, Few calmly addressed his team, insisting they would come back. He then ceded the floor to the FDE—and Timme's words were neither calm nor G-rated. As he dropped f-bombs, telling teammates they "weren't going out like this," the mood changed. And, when the game resumed, Timme unveiled his full arsenal, prompting Watson to say he witnessed "the most unstoppable force I've ever seen."

In only four minutes, Timme scored 11 straight points. As Adam Morrison—Zags legend, color analyst and precursor for mustache-tinged stardom—watched, he became mesmerized. "Some of those moves I hadn't even seen," he says.

Gonzaga won, advancing to the Sweet 16. Timme retreated to his hotel room to play *Super Smash Bros.* But the Bulldogs lost to Arkansas five days later and, once again, the program's swollen expectations made a wildly successful season seem like something less. So 28–4 was a failure? *Really?*

Timme did not play video games that night. Nor did he consider whether he might leave school. Instead, he went out with his family, enjoying rum-and-Cokes before turning to his favorite beer. He let the central question linger. Would he take not just his talents but his distinct joy to the NBA?

— By Jeremy Woo —

SIX MONTHS LATER, there's Timme, on the Zags' practice court, spinning and twisting and scoring like he never wanted to leave. Twenty-six banners of NBA players from Gonzaga hang from a wall nearby, soon to be joined by two more: Holmgren, the top pick of the Thunder, and point guard Andrew Nembhard, who was selected by the Pacers. Timme's beard is fully grown, just itching for its first shaping of another season. "Gonzaga makes me happy," he says.

He did take a long, atypically serious look at professional basketball. But in the way only he could, because he is Timme. He started with an easy baseline, deciding to participate in the combine and team workouts. He wanted to gauge the possibilities, and he couldn't do that if he didn't play. But he promised himself he wouldn't lose the joy that now defined him.

He also left Bolton, a combo guard, and wing Julian Strawther—both NBA-caliber players—to make their own decisions on returning. He didn't want to be the kind of influence he himself was avoiding. Perhaps the most nervous person in greater Spokane was his buddy Watson, who knew, like everyone, that Holmgren and Nembhard would jump—and who wondered, like everyone, whether the other three would, too.

Timme made a loose list of pros and cons. Timme played. Timme weighed. Timme vacillated. A solid combine appearance pushed him toward declaring, though most mock drafts had him as a second-rounder. Everything else—normalcy, Few, Watson, biology, the chance to win an elusive title—made him reconsider.

On the morning of the deadline, Timme still wasn't sure. He had just returned from a workout with the Warriors, which he had prepared for by watching WWE highlights. Because he is Timme and he finds professional wrestling *relaxing*, it had gone well.

He settled in front of his Xbox at the family's home in Texas and

cued up *FIFA 22*, pushing buttons and continuing to assess. The NBA meant immediate salary and a quicker path to the pros, the start of his next life. Gonzaga meant completing his degree in sports management and remaining part of the family, plus another run that would only (in theory) make him a better prospect. But he would need to prove that, too, by improving in the ways professional teams desired: switching off ball screens, draining threes, stretching the floor. His NBA teammates wouldn't experience the full FDE, because after practices most would return home to their families.

Leaving, he decided, constituted a bigger gamble—and that stemmed, in large part, from how the college basketball landscape had changed around him. His classmates at Gonzaga aren't starstruck. But because of new NIL rules, he also was no longer like them. He could endorse products, bank millions and still laugh his way through marketing classes.

O'Neal, a member of the prep-to-pros generation, was 17 when Portland drafted him 17th in 1996, and 18 when he played his first pro game. He knew, better than Timme ever would, how joyless professional basketball could be at times. He started only 18 times in his first four seasons, and, while he survived that period and thrived afterward, he wasn't sure that Timme needed to endure the same. Not if he no longer had to.

"I definitely would have gone [if not for rule changes]," Timme says. "Honestly, it's great for college basketball." He cites a Nov. 20 clash scheduled with Kentucky at nearby Spokane Arena, against fellow All-American big Oscar Tshiebwe. Two stars. Two pitchmen. Two powers. All without leaving college!

Morrison, asked how much money he might have made off his mustache in his era, if it had been allowed, just laughs. "Too wispy," he says before pivoting back to Timme. "But it's part of his brand, part of what makes him just a happy kid."

Speaking of: Timme the brand had already partnered with a local casino, Northern Quest Resort; Boost Mobile; and, naturally, Dollar Shave Club. As decision day reached its final hour, Timme hung out with his parents. Really, he already knew. "Oh, my God," Megan says. "So annoying. I'm a bundle of nerves, and he's in there playing video games."

Because he is Timme, he announced his choice with a two-word tweet, sent with 46 minutes to spare. "I'm back." Bolton was so excited, he called his mom. He would return, too, along with Strawther, while Gonzaga added high-profile transfers in Malachi Smith (from Chattanooga) and Efton Reid (LSU), reconfiguring and repositioning for another run.

As he went back to his Xbox, Timme knew one thing with absolute certainty. It was time, once more, for 'stache szn.

FOLLOW THE LEADERS

Inexperienced head coaches will take over for multiple-championship winners at Duke and Villanova in the most prominent of the many changes on the bench this season

▸ **WHEN REPLACING** a successful coach, one approach is to bring in a known quantity—think of Bill Self following Roy Williams at Kansas. Another is to tap a longtime assistant—like North Carolina did when Hubert Davis followed Williams in Chapel Hill. This year two top programs are taking the second option, replacing legends with men who have the combined experience of one year as head coach.

Mike Krzyzewski led Duke for one last Final Four run last season, capping a career that spanned 47 seasons and brought five NCAA titles to Durham, before handing things off to his designated successor: top assistant, ace recruiter and former Blue Devils star **Jon Scheyer**. But even though the transfer of power was orderly—and Coach K claims he doesn't plan to attend games at Cameron Indoor Stadium this season—the shadow of the man who built Duke basketball will loom large.

Scheyer is set up to start strong. Freshmen Dariq Whitehead, Dereck Lively II and Tyrese Proctor all have one-and-done talent, and they will likely anchor the rotation alongside junior guard Jeremy Roach. Scheyer has also bolstered the roster with graduate transfers and, showing he is in step with the modern game, he has brought in former Nike exec Rachel Baker in a new role focused on creating NIL partnerships and supporting players off the court. He is also casting a

CHRIS KEANE

IN JULY, PISTONS center Kelly Olynyk arrives late for his favorite annual tradition. It's perfect and perfectly Gonzaga. In every non-pandemic year since 2015, during the NBA's summer league, the Zags-to-pros generation has gathered with university support staff at places like Bavette's to eat steak, drink wine and do impressions of Mount Few. At first, they needed only a single table. But now, having outgrown the dining room, they settle into a private space in back.

Five weeks after "I'm back," Timme is notable for his absence, which is welcomed by those in attendance, because of what it means. Olynyk and Holmgren, who will soon see his rookie year postponed by a foot injury, share stories. Wizards forward Rui Hachimura passes around bottles of his new wine, Black Samurai.

Next year will be an even larger event. "I'm already making plans for a bigger room," senior associate AD Jared Hertz says. One that can accommodate a personality the size of the FDE.

Timme is part of this tradition, this progression, that makes Gonzaga unlike any other power in college hoops. Holmgren suggests that Netflix give Timme his own show. "*Timme Time*?" Drew ponders. But while different—in vibe, headband and facial hair—from the Zags stars who came before, he's also just like them. He calls Robert Sacre, the jovial former Lakers 7-footer, "my spirit animal."

To consider Timme one of the Zags' biggest personalities, rather than one of the program's best-ever players, is to miss the 'stache shape for the individual hairs. While Olynyk doesn't disagree with evaluators' assessments of where Timme needs to improve, he also describes him as "an unbelievable basketball player" and "one of the most skilled I've ever seen."

FORCE AT FOUR

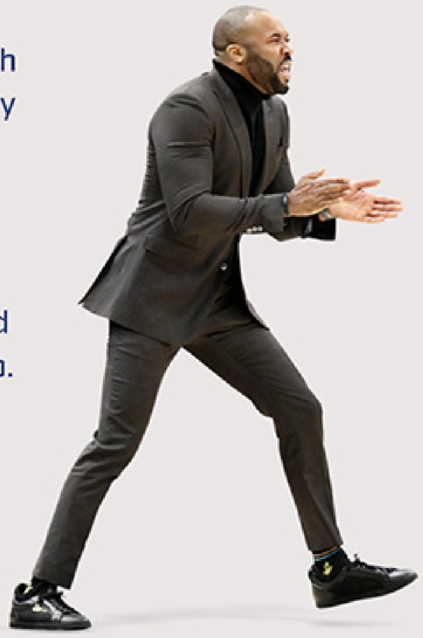
Last season Timme took home the Karl Malone Award as the top power forward in college basketball.

"I always worry," Megan Timme says. "But I will say this: He [has] always found his way. It may not have been the way I wanted him to get through it. Or the way I thought he'd get there. And yet, he figures it out. He always finds his joy."

For now, that's in Spokane, where Drew Timme refuses to define success by national titles, endorsement income or mustache-awareness raised. It's all part of the same experience, which, for his mother, is counterintuitive, but in the best possible way. Her son loves college basketball as much as anyone loves anything. Had the sport not changed its rules, however, to reflect what it really is—a billion-dollar business—he would have left.

Timme long ago cemented his place in Gonzaga basketball lore. He wasn't what anyone expected. He was better. He was more. He

wide net on the recruiting trail, with five players already committed for the 2023–24 season, including another likely one-and-done, 6' 8" forward Mackenzie Mgbako.



Like Duke, Villanova is also heading into a season of transition. Jay Wright, the architect of the Big East's tentpole program and winner of national titles in 2016 and '18, stepped down unexpectedly in April, retiring at age 60. Wright said his engagement level was waning and he hoped to spend more time with his family, but it was surprising as his departure came after the Wildcats' third Final Four appearance in six seasons. Villanova's new coach is **Kyle Neptune**, who served as Wright's assistant from '13 to '21. He comes back to the campus after leading Fordham last season—his only head coaching experience.

Neptune, who began his coaching career as Villanova's video coordinator from 2008 to '10, has equity within the program similar to Scheyer's at Duke. Along with having a hand in Wright's tournament success, he also helped the Wildcats turn out quality NBA players—Kyle Lowry, Jalen Brunson and Mikal Bridges among them. Neptune aided Wright in building one of the sturdiest programs in the sport, as Villanova didn't have a single one-and-done prospect in the Wright era (the program's last was Tim Thomas in 1997). Ironically, promising freshman Cam Whitmore may go one-and-done in Neptune's first season at the helm. Otherwise, the Wildcats bring three starters from last year's squad and are hoping to see backcourt stalwart Justin Moore, who tore his Achilles in last year's Elite Eight, back at full strength. Unlike most teams around the country, Villanova hasn't taken on a transfer in two seasons.

G FIUME/GETTY IMAGES

was extra—all flash and ’stache and *Riverdance*-intro routines.

Forget all that for a moment, though. Lobbed impossible-but-related questions—*How many players should be on Gonzaga’s Mt. Rushmore? Where would Timme fit?*—Michaelson, the Zags’ assistant, waffles briefly, considering the options. Then he begins to think out loud. *Timme has to be in the discussion. . . . He has been unbelievably consistent. . . . NCAA tournament wins. . . . Points amassed. . . . He’s gonna be a three-time All-American. . . . You start to add up what he’s done, and you’re talking about a very select group of guys. . . . Not even just at Gonzaga. . . . A very small group of guys in college basketball.*

Top 15? Top 10? Top five? “I don’t care what criteria you use,” Michaelson says. “Drew goes on the smallest of small lists.”

Drew Timme, because he is Timme, can see it: The 2022–23 season unfolds. The Zags don’t lose. They win the title that no one can stop asking them about. “Then we throw a rager at McCarthy,” Timme says, referencing the arena he calls home, for now. His eyes twinkle at the thought of so many Dos Equis kegs, along with the ’stache he would shape for the celebration. ◻

Duke and Villanova aren’t the only top programs with leadership changes. Todd Golden, 37, takes over at Florida after a successful stint at San Francisco; Kevin Willard left Seton Hall to replace Mark Turgeon at Maryland, leaving his old job open for Shaheen Holloway, who is fresh off an electric NCAA tournament run at St. Peter’s. Louisville turns to **Kenny Payne**, who looks to revive a program that has been something of an afterthought since Rick Pitino’s 2017 exit and Chris Mack’s unimpressive two seasons. Payne, a former Cardinals star in the 1980s and longtime Kentucky assistant who was critical to John Calipari’s staff before spending the past two years with the Knicks, is known as a strong recruiter and communicator.

There is also intrigue beyond the bluebloods. Thad Matta, 55, returns to Butler, where he began his head-coaching career before his 13-year run at Ohio State. It’s been five years since Matta stepped away from the Buckeyes, due in part to health issues. The Bulldogs, who flew to great heights under Brad Stevens, haven’t had the same success since moving to the Big East nine years ago.

After missing a year following his dismissal from Arizona in April 2021 amid the fallout from a high-profile NCAA investigation into that program, Sean Miller returns to the sidelines at Xavier, where he last led its program in ’09. And after Will Wade’s dismissal from LSU following a federally investigated pay-for-play scandal, Matt McMahon takes over for the Tigers after a successful run at Murray State, where he and his staff unearthed Ja Morant and built a mid-major powerhouse. ◻

ROBERT JOHNSON/GETTY IMAGES (TIMME); WESLEY HILT/GETTY IMAGES (PAYNE)

Men's Top

BY **KEVIN SWEENEY**
PHOTOGRAPH BY **CHRIS KEANE**

> The Tar Heels may have stormed to the title game last spring as an 8 seed, but they won't be taking anyone by surprise this time around as they enter the season at the top of the rankings

1 **NORTH CAROLINA:** The nucleus of the Heels team that made the 2022 title game is back. Northwestern transfer Pete Nance (14.6 ppg) joins **Armando Bacot** in the frontcourt to give UNC the nation's best starting lineup.

2 **GONZAGA:** The Bulldogs have finished first or second nationally in KenPom's rankings in four straight seasons but have no title to show for it. In addition to three returning starters, coach Mark Few has another experienced player to lean on: point guard Malachi Smith, last season's mid-major player of the year at Chattanooga.

3 **HOUSTON:** Any Kelvin Sampson team will defend and rebound, but what makes this group special is its guard play, thanks to Jamal Shead and Marcus Sasser, who missed most of last season with a toe injury. The Cougars added forwards Jarace Walker and Terrance Arceneaux; both were in the top 70 of the SI99 recruit rankings.

4 **KENTUCKY:** The Wildcats are the first team to bring back the men's National Player of the Year since 2009 when Tyler Hansbrough returned to North Carolina. The end result for the Heels that year? A national title. Can Oscar Tshiebwe and the Wildcats replicate that in '23?

5 **DUKE:** The Blue Devils will start the post–Coach K era with a stocked cupboard thanks to the nation's top recruiting class, complemented by veteran point guard Jeremy Roach and transfer Jacob Grandison (Illinois). Jon Scheyer's first team will be strong on defense with freshman Dereck Lively II protecting the rim.

STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES

6 **BAYLOR:** Expect impressive guard work in Waco as smooth playmaking freshman Keyonte George joins proven commodities Adam Flagler and LJ Cryer in the backcourt. The Bears are coming off three straight top-five AP finishes and shouldn't have much of a drop-off this year.

7 **ARKANSAS:** After consecutive Elite Eight appearances, Eric Musselman may have his most talented roster yet. Highly touted freshman Nick Smith Jr., a combo guard with electric hops, could be the best NBA prospect in college hoops this season.

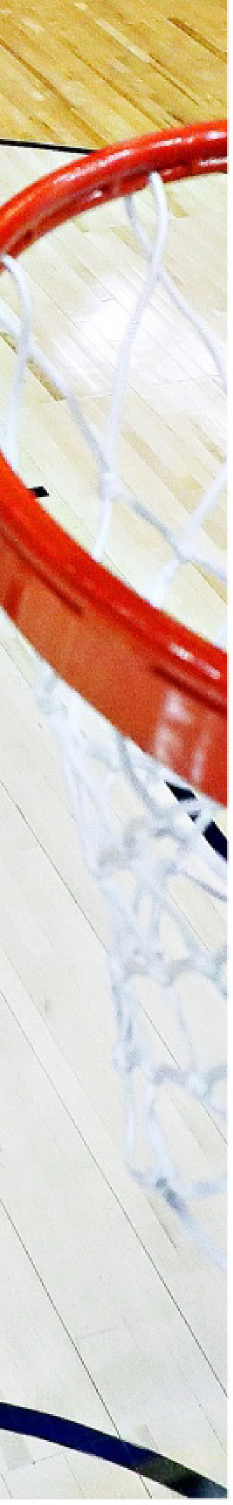
8 **CREIGHTON:** The Bluejays punched above their weight in 2021–22, winning 23 games with five new starters. Now that talented young core will have that year of experience to grow on. Remember the name Arthur Kaluma: the rangy 6' 7" sophomore forward could be this season's breakout star.

9 **KANSAS:** The defending champs lost a lot of firepower—four of their top five scorers—but junior forward **Jalen Wilson**, who had four double doubles during the Jayhawks' NCAA tournament run, should be among the Big 12's top players. Plus, Bill Self's incoming freshman class is his best in years.

10 **UCLA:** Mick Cronin has an experienced core (all-conference seniors Jaime Jaquez Jr. and Tyger Campbell) and a five-star prospect up front (6' 10" freshman center Adem Bona).

11 **TENNESSEE:** Rick Barnes has revived the Vols in his seven seasons in Knoxville but has yet to advance past the Sweet 16. Tennessee should excel on D as it did last year, while sharpshooting guard Santiago Vescovi is perhaps the sport's most underappreciated star.

12 **TEXAS:** There's no doubt the Longhorns have talent after adding top transfer Tyrese Hunter (Iowa State) at point guard and freshman forward Dillon Mitchell. But the team needs to mesh better than last year's group, which never reached its ceiling, crashing out of the NCAA tournament in the second round.



13 **VILLANOVA:** Kyle Neptune has the unenviable task of following Jay Wright as the Wildcats' coach. Before he retired, though, Wright landed top recruit Cam Whitmore, and he'll leave his former assistant three impact players from last year's Final Four squad: Caleb Daniels, Brandon Slater and Eric Dixon.

14 **SAN DIEGO STATE:** The Aztecs may end up being the best defensive team in the country thanks to Nathan Mensah, a shot-blocking wizard. They'll have just enough offensive firepower to entertain legitimate Final Four aspirations.

15 **ILLINOIS:** After two years of pounding the ball inside to 7-footer Kofi Cockburn, the Illini will have a more versatile attack. Cockburn is gone, and in are positionless pieces such as transfers Matthew Mayer (Baylor) and Terrence Shannon Jr. (Texas Tech), and freshman Ty Rodgers. Freshman point guard Skyy Clark must bring the group together.

16 **ARIZONA:** Tommy Lloyd went 33–4 in his first season as a head coach but lost three key cogs to the NBA. Forward Azuolas Tubelis and guard Kerr Kriisa give Lloyd something to build around in Year 2.

17 **TEXAS TECH:** Mark Adams's patented no-middle defense (which ranked first in the nation in efficiency) gives the Red Raiders a high floor. And while the team has new faces to assimilate into a squad that reached the Sweet 16 last year, this transfer-heavy bunch has plenty of offensive potential, led by 6' 11" Fardaws Aimaq, who averaged 18.9 ppg for Utah Valley last year.

18 **DAYTON:** The Flyers soared late after struggling early in 2021–22 and bring back all five starters. Excitement is high for a reason: The young pick-and-roll duo of point guard Malachi Smith and forward **DaRon Holmes II** is special. They led Dayton to 24 wins as freshmen, creating expectations for even more as sophomores.

19 **UCONN:** Coach Dan Hurley has reworked the backcourt with transfers Tristen Newton (17.7 ppg at East Carolina) and Nahiem Alleyne (Virginia Tech) joining returnees Andre Jackson Jr. and Jordan Hawkins. Utilizing small-ball lineups with Jackson at the four to add more shooting around 6' 9" junior big man Adama Sanogo could be a winning formula.

G FIUME/GETTY IMAGES

20 **INDIANA:** Experience is on the Hoosiers' side. They have four senior starters, including big man Trayce Jackson-Davis (18.3 ppg) and point guard Xavier Johnson, whose play last year was a barometer for Indiana's success.

21 **ALABAMA:** Guard Mark Sears (19.6 ppg at Ohio) and freshman forward Brandon Miller give the Tide upside, but getting point guard Jahvon Quinerly healthy, after a torn ACL ended his season ended in Bama's first-round NCAA loss to Notre Dame, will be crucial.

22 **TCU:** Much of the squad that nearly upset Arizona in the NCAA tournament returns. The Horned Frogs will again be one of the nation's most physical teams, though they need to limit turnovers better than they did last year.

23 **AUBURN:** It's not easy replacing first-rounders like Jabari Smith Jr. and Walker Kessler, but certainly Bruce Pearl did about as well as could be expected by adding a pair of 6' 10" forwards, freshman Yohan Traore and Morehead State transfer Johni Broome, the OVC defensive player of the year.

24 **MICHIGAN:** 7' 1" Hunter Dickinson led the Wolverines to the Sweet 16 despite uneven play around him in 2021–22. The script could be similar this year, though coach Juwan Howard's son Jett and Princeton transfer Jaelin Llewellyn should be valuable reinforcements at guard.

25 **XAVIER:** Sean Miller returns as coach after taking the Musketeers to the second weekend of the NCAA tournament twice in his first stint at the school, which ended in 2009. Inheriting wing Colby Jones and a deep frontcourt should position him for early success.

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Nothing but

LOV

BASKETBALL 22 NCAA 23 PREVIEW

After losing in the national semifinals last season, Stanford has hit the drawing board—enlisting what players call a

“HAPPINESS PROFESSOR”

and absorbing feedback from former NBA stars like Pau Gasol—as it aims to return to the Final Four

BY
BEN PICKMAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY
DAVID E. KLUTHO

RIGHT COURT
VanDerveer (below) and Brink (right) say one professor's sessions have helped Stanford deal with the stresses of playing collegiate basketball.

KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS

STANFORD FORWARD Cameron Brink looked on from the bench, having fouled out of her team's February matchup against Oregon late in the fourth quarter. As she sat and watched the waning seconds of the contest, with then No. 2 Stanford clinging to a three-point lead, something clicked in her mind.

With 6.5 seconds to play, Agnes Emma-Nnopu went to the free throw line. The then sophomore guard would take only nine shots from the stripe all season and make just five of them. On this night, she missed the first. In between the pair, Brink and then teammate guard Alyssa Jerome called out from the sideline, "You're loved, Agnes. We love you!"

"Just letting her know we're behind you," Brink says now. "It kinda just felt second nature."

Emma-Nnopu took a deep breath and sank her second attempt, stretching Stanford's lead to four. A few ticks later, the Cardinal basked in the elation of the victory that kept them in the mix for the Pac-12 title, a win that All-American Haley Jones says was a "make-or-break moment" for the group.

Brink and Jerome's message was no coincidence. Every Tuesday, usually before the start of practice, coach Tara VanDerveer invited Frederic Luskin to speak with the team. Luskin is an educator, author and director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, which researches the effectiveness of "forgiveness therapy." With players gathered around him, Luskin would begin his 10-minute meditations with a guided visualization or breathing exercise, before raising that day's central theme, usually pertaining to the qualities of grit or the power of love. He would conclude with another interactive component, like asking those in attendance to imagine what a successful practice would look like or think of someone on the team you were affectionate toward and feel the warmth in your heart.

Among the basketball situations he discussed most were high-pressure, late-game moments at the free throw line. "If you're taking a free throw and you're anxious about the outcome, remind yourself that you're loved," he often told them.

"Like a cool, full circle moment," Brink, now a junior, says of Emma-Nnopu's free throw.

Throughout last season, the Cardinal "soaked up every minute we could get" with Luskin, says Brink, who playfully calls him "Stanford's happiness professor." VanDerveer believes he has been helpful to the program. This season, time will be invaluable for the Cardinal. Returning players are especially cognizant of making the most of every second and every game.

Over the course of one subpar outing against UConn in the national semifinals this past April, Jones, a rising senior, went from a player who had never lost an NCAA tournament contest—March Madness was canceled during her freshman season, and Stanford won the tourney during Jones's sophomore campaign—to one who likely has one collegiate run left. Weeks before that, the team and university had been reminded of life's fragility when Stanford soccer goalie Katie Meyer died by suicide. Luskin was among the people who helped the players process initial feelings of grief.

STANFORD
22

DAVID E. KLUTHO

VanDerveer sees this year's team "as a totally different puzzle to put together," due in part to the departures of starting guards Lexie and Lacie Hull and Anna Wilson, as well as reserves Jordan Hamilton, Jenna Brown and Jana Van Gytenbeek (the latter two via the transfer portal). Nevertheless, entering this season, expectations remain high. "As a team, we have the same goals every year," Jones says. "It's an undefeated regular season. Win the Pac-12 regular season. Win the Pac-12 title. Win the regional. Win the natty." Sure, those are lofty aspirations, but they are also not unreasonable considering the school's talented roster and recent history.

It's impossible to exactly quantify how much Luskin helps Jones, Brink or any one teammate on any given possession. VanDerveer is a traditionally intense coach but says she has recognized in recent years the importance of finding new ways to reach her players. Luskin helps keep the team centered, says the coach, and fosters feelings of togetherness, which can pay dividends on the hardwood. Stanford's returners have had time to apply Luskin's teachings to an adverse situation, like their abrupt tournament exit against the Huskies and significant roster turnover, and think about their response. "We do everything with joy because we all love what we're doing and we love each other," Jones says.

The Cardinal are hoping the most euphoric of celebrations awaits.

LAST APRIL, a few hours before Stanford took the Target Center floor for its Final Four matchup against UConn, Cardinal players were greeted with a pleasant surprise. With the group gathered in a hotel conference room to watch film, Luskin popped up on their projector screen. Players initially complimented Luskin on his haircut, and then he gave the Cardinal a parting message: *Not for a second believe that you have failed even if you lose the next game. Acknowledge success and try and extend it, rather than being afraid of failure.*

Try as they might, though, Stanford struggled to crack the Huskies' defense. The Cardinal scored only nine first-quarter points and eventually totaled just 58, their second-lowest output since Nov. 26. Brink, having watched the contest again three times, citing the team's shooting woes—Stanford finished 34.8% from the field and 17.4% from three-point range.

"I think we kinda just picked the wrong day to play so poorly," VanDerveer says. "We were out of sync. We did not have our A game."

In the locker room afterward, the focus of the Cardinal was on their five seniors. The veterans had been instrumental in Stanford's title run the year before, creating a fun-loving and mentally tough atmosphere while the team spent nearly 100 nights on the road (Santa Clara County's COVID-19 restrictions forced the team into a nomadic lifestyle). Throughout the 2021–22 season, the quintet anchored a group that bonded through shared time on the court and by seeking out local coffee shops, performing TikTok dances and creating their own Wordle games on a whiteboard in the locker room—thinking of a five-letter word and then others guessing different combinations.

"We genuinely enjoy each other's company; we're kind of friends first, teammates second," Jones said last winter.

Players went around to one another's lockers and exchanged lengthy embraces. Brink estimates there were 10 minutes of silence before some of the seniors spoke to the team or coaches shared their wrap-up comments.

"That was a time where it could have been like, 'Wow, eff everything Fred said. None of that meant anything to me. It was all a show,' " Jones says. "In the locker room, it was full of sadness, but I think it was sadness that was more than a basketball season ending. It was a sadness that was more so centered around that group of girls. That was an end of an era."

STANFORD'S SENIOR CLASS already has a nickname. They call themselves "The Funky Four." Guard Hannah Jump and forwards Fran Belibi and Ashten Prechtel are the first three in the group, followed by Jones, the lone returning captain from last season.

Despite her parents being former co-head coaches for the Santa Cruz High girls basketball program, Jones was a multisport athlete. Throughout her youth, in addition to playing hoops, she dabbled in soccer, volleyball, gymnastics, golf and swimming. That's part of why Haley and her parents see basketball as something she does—and loves—but not exclusively who she is.

Her father, Patrick, says Haley was an inviting presence, no matter the activity. He recalls her always looking to include teammates as much as possible in drills and organizing games at school. She has been the same way at Stanford.

STANFORD'S RETURNERS HAVE HAD TIME TO APPLY LUSKIN'S TEACHINGS. "WE DO EVERYTHING WITH JOY BECAUSE WE ALL LOVE WHAT WE'RE DOING AND WE LOVE EACH OTHER," JONES SAYS.

Jones seldom raises her voice. Her family instilled in her a motto: *Calm is strength*. And through three collegiate seasons, VanDerveer says Jones has "never really" shown frustration.

The 2021 Final Four Most Outstanding Player brushes off any notions of feeling pressure entering her senior campaign. "I think it's more excitement [than nerves]," Jones says. Part of that anticipation comes from moving to a new role—previously more of a wing and forward, Jones will be tasked as Stanford's lead ballhandler.

To prepare, Jones spent the offseason working on her dribbling and perimeter shooting. She trained with skills coach Packie Turner, who has helped other high-profile court creators like Stephen Curry and Sabrina Ionescu. VanDerveer tosses out other guards, like Aces star Chelsea Gray and former U.S. Olympian Teresa Edwards, as possible models for Jones's game. "She's kinda the Magic Johnson–type point guard," VanDerveer says. "A big, strong, physical player that can go to the basket."

Jones continues to foster individual relationships with each of her teammates, seeking to understand everyone's styles and how they like to receive feedback. "When you're playing with people that you love, you're gonna want to work that much harder for them," she says—her comments echoing sentiments voiced by Luskin. She also hopes to build a level of trust with her peers so that "if I need to yell at them, they'll be able to take it and know, *She wants what's best for me, she loves me and this is for the betterment of the team.*"

HALEY'SMOMENT
Jones has been referred to as the Magic Johnson of women's basketball by VanDerveer.

ABBIE PARR/GETTY IMAGES

AROUND A HALF decade ago, VanDerveer sat in on a guest-speaker session with the university's athletics department. The speaker was Luskin, who taught a course on campus called The Art and Science of Happiness. His lecture to the staff focused on the intersection of emotions and sports, and how stress and negativity adversely impact performance. "The normal sport psychology talk," he says, "but with a decided push toward happiness and what makes people happy." The key: "relationships and purpose." VanDerveer was inspired, and soon afterward invited Luskin to speak to her team.

Initially, Luskin's sessions with the Cardinal were more sporadic, but they have become more regular due to his limited travel amid the COVID-19 pandemic. VanDerveer and Luskin are aligned on their beliefs, and the coach says hearing the same message from another voice can be beneficial. "I think he really grew on everyone," VanDerveer says. "I felt he motivated [the team]."

Luskin's teachings have been especially resonant with Brink, who has "I love you" in American Sign Language tattooed on her right rib cage. She cites his Zoom meetings as being helpful in reframing the feelings of homesickness and isolation she felt as a freshman. Last season, she drew on his messages about thankfulness for others and about avoiding labeling people. When Stanford lost to UConn in the Final Four, past conversations about not blaming oneself, or teammates, in the wake of struggles rang clear.

"His teachings are so simple, yet so profound," she says.

Brink is trying to apply those messages to how she treats the team's freshmen, especially 6' 7" center Lauren Betts, who was rated as ESPN HoopGurlz's No. 1 recruit. When Betts performs well in sessions, Brink looks her in the eyes and says, "You're f------ killing it. Keep doing that. You're great." Brink also invested in her own growth. She emphasized her mental development—she says she still sometimes gets anxious before games and second-guesses herself, so she tries to focus on what she is good at to balance her nerves. "I'm good at bringing energy, at recognizing how I feel when I'm in flow." She spent time with various strength trainers and skills coaches to diversify her game and also worked out with six-time NBA All-Star Pau Gasol, who helped her with her footwork and post moves. "It was the biggest compliment, because he'd tell me a lot, 'You're a bit like me,' " she says. " 'You're not going to win by just bully ball. You're going to win by outsmarting people.' "

Players like Brink and Betts will help keep Stanford at the top of the national conversation beyond this year, but the focus now is on the short term and creating a shared purpose. Luskin will continue to engage in weekly meetings with the team and coaches. He plans on occasionally referencing Phil Jackson's 11 principles of mindful leadership. Many are similar to things Luskin has offered in the past, but he believes connecting his work with the Hall of Fame coach will give "an intellectual basketball anchor."

Stanford has one of the country's most daunting schedules, with nonconference home matchups against South Carolina and Tennessee. Brink's theory is VanDerveer made the schedule difficult "to make us band together." A national title would no doubt be satisfying, but Brink makes clear the team shouldn't be defined by it.

"You're so much more than just what you do on the day-to-day," she says. "Everyone else around you is human. And the more you create this environment of love and acceptance and tolerance, the better everyone will thrive." □

Women's Top

BY WILTON JACKSON AND BEN PICKMAN

South Carolina and its returning star are the early favorites to repeat as national champions, but a handful of programs look capable of mounting a challenge after offseason boosts to their lineups

1 **SOUTH CAROLINA:** **Aliyah Boston**, last season's National Player of the Year, returns for her senior season, which means that coach Dawn Staley's reigning champions are once again the team to beat.

2 **STANFORD:** The Cardinal backcourt will look different following the departures of sisters Lexie and Lacie Hull, and Anna Wilson. But senior guard Haley Jones leads a roster stocked with talent.

3 **TEXAS:** The Longhorns, who reached the Elite Eight last year, have not been to a Final Four since 2003, but the addition of back-to-back WCC Player of the Year Shaylee Gonzales from BYU could help them take that next step.

4 **IOWA:** **Caitlin Clark**, the nation's leading scorer last year (27.0 ppg), returns for her junior season alongside talented fifth-year post player Monika Czinano (21.2 ppg), but the Hawkeyes' key will be getting defensive stops.

5 **CONNECTICUT:** Paige Bueckers will miss the entire season after an offseason ACL tear, but coach Geno Auriemma will be aiming for his 15th straight Final Four behind two freshmen who were top-five recruits, forwards Ice Brady and Ayanna Patterson.

6 **NOTRE DAME:** After a heartbreaking Sweet 16 loss, the Fighting Irish should come back strong behind guards Olivia Miles (who last year became the first freshman to post a triple double in the history of the men's or women's tourney), Sonia Citron and Dara Mabrey.

BEN SOLOMON/NCAA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (BOSTON); JOSEPH CRESS/IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN/USA TODAY NETWORK (CLARK)

7 **LOUISVILLE:** The Cardinals lost three starters from last year's team, but coach Jeff Walz still has brilliant junior guard Hailey Van Lith and has added two exceptional transfer guards in Morgan Jones (Florida State) and Chrislyn Carr (Syracuse), in addition to bringing in a solid recruiting class.

8 **IOWA STATE:** Continuity could be the key as senior wing Ashley Joens gives the Cyclones a strong All-American candidate. Plus, junior guards Emily Ryan and Lexi Donarski could prove to be the Big 12's best backcourt.

9 **TENNESSEE:** Though Rae Burrell is now on the WNBA's Sparks roster, the Lady Vols are still loaded thanks to freshman wing Justine Pissott, key veteran returners and the transfers brought in by coach Kellie Harper.

10 **NC STATE:** Wes Moore's program is coming off its first Elite Eight appearance since 1998. The Wolfpack bring back three vets—junior guard Diamond Johnson, senior wing Jakia Brown-Turner and senior center Camille Hobby—who will keep this team in the ACC fray.

11 **VIRGINIA TECH:** The Hokies, looking to bounce back from an opening-round tournament departure, add two-time All-American guard Ashley Owusu from Maryland and grad student forward Taylor Soule, who averaged 16.0 points for Boston College last year, to a team led by senior center Elizabeth Kitley, the reigning ACC Player of the Year.

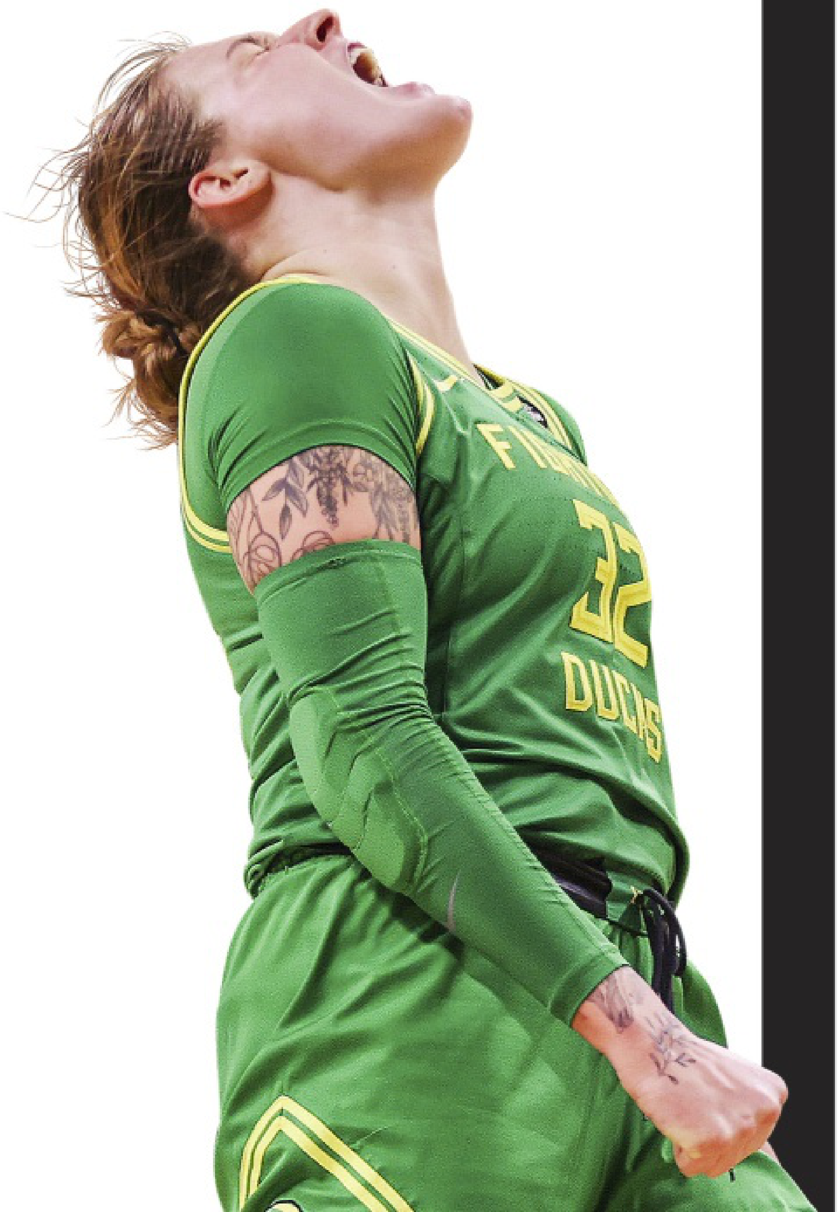
12 **NORTH CAROLINA:** The Tar Heels gave the eventual-champion Gamecocks all they could handle in the Sweet 16 last year and return four starters, including junior guard Deja Kelly, who was fourth in the ACC in scoring last season with 16.5 ppg.

13 **INDIANA:** The Hoosiers followed up their best season in program history in 2020–21 with another superb one last year (24–9). Indiana will now compete for the Big Ten title behind grad student guard Grace Berger and senior forward Mackenzie Holmes.

14 **OKLAHOMA:** In Jennie Baranczyk's second season as coach, the Sooners return all key players from last year's 25–9 squad. Sharpshooting guard Aubrey Joens—the sister of Iowa State star Ashley—joins what should be a high-powered offense.

15 **OHIO STATE:** The Buckeyes have two key scorers back in senior guards Jacy Sheldon and Taylor Mikesell, but they will need production from the paint if they want to build off their finish as Big Ten co-champions.

16 **LSU:** Hall of Fame coach Kim Mulkey led the Tigers to 26 wins in her first season with the program. This year's retooled roster will feature Alexis Morris and Maryland transfer Angel Reese.



17 **MARYLAND:** The Terrapins lost five players to the transfer portal but restocked by pulling five out of it, including grad student forward Brinae Alexander, who was all-SEC last year at Vanderbilt.

18 **ARIZONA:** Coach Adia Barnes continues to be one of the sport's preeminent recruiters and tacticians. While the Wildcats lost in the second round of last year's NCAA tournament, a roster rich with budding talent should have them ready to take another shot.

19 **BAYLOR:** After losing two first-round picks in the WNBA draft, the Bears won't dominate the Big 12 as they did last season. But coach Nicki Collen enters Year 2 with five returners plus some high-profile transfers and a top-notch recruiting class led by guard Bella Fontleroy.

20 **OREGON:** One of the Ducks' frontcourt stars from last year, Nyara Sabally, turned pro, but 6' 7" senior forward **Sedona Prince** is back and will serve as anchor. A great recruiting class features two McDonald's All-Americans in guard Chance Gray and forward Grace VanSlooten.

21 **CREIGHTON:** The Bluejays, after a thrilling run to their first Elite Eight, bring back eight players, including Lauren Jensen, who shot 43.7% from three last year. While coach Jim Flanery will miss Tatum Rembao, the program has high expectations.

22 **PRINCETON:** The high of upsetting Kentucky in last year's tournament didn't keep the Tigers from losing Ivy League Player of the Year Abby Meyers to Maryland. But they will bring back their next two leading scorers, guards Julia Cunningham and Kaitlyn Chen.

23 **GEORGIA:** Katie Abrahamson-Henderson arrives as coach from UCF, where her team won a school-record 26 games last year. She brought a trio of players with her and secured fifth-year wing Audrey Warren (Texas) from the transfer portal.

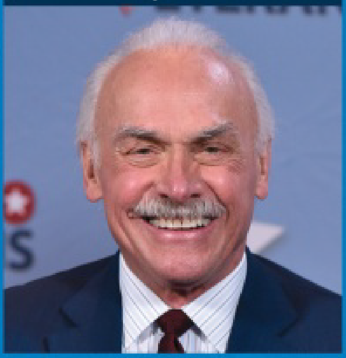
24 **UCLA:** After making the WNIT semis last March, the Bruins enter this season with perhaps the country's best freshman class, highlighted by Premier Basketball's No. 2 recruit, guard Kiki Rice.

25 **BELMONT:** The Bruins have pulled first-round NCAA tournament upsets in back-to-back years and will look to take another step forward. Two key players, junior guards Destinee Wells and Tuti Jones, return to an offense that loves to shoot the three-point ball. □

ABIGAIL DOLLINS/STATESMAN JOURNAL/USA TODAY NETWORK

SALUTE TO VETERANS

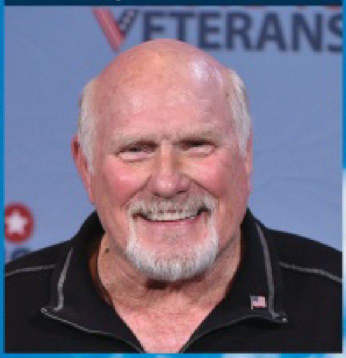
★ **Rocky Bleier** ★



U.S. Army Veteran,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh

U.S.ARMY

★ **Terry Bradshaw** ★



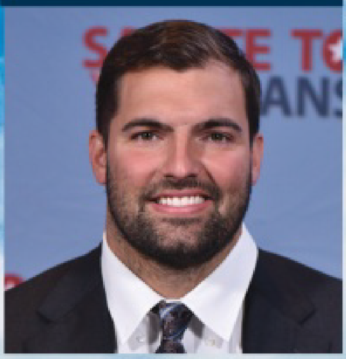
TV Host & Hall of Famer,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh

★ **Greg Gadson** ★

U.S. Army Veteran,
Honorary Captain,
2-time Champion with New York

U.S.ARMY

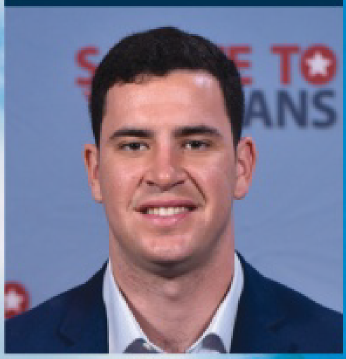
★ **Alejandro Villanueva** ★



U.S. Army Veteran,
2-time Pro Bowler,
Baltimore

U.S.ARMY

★ **Joe Cardona** ★



U.S. Navy Veteran,
2-time Champion,
New England

U.S. NAVY

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18 YDS
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17
BENGALS
1

THE GREAT WIDE

OPEN

PASS-CATCHING CONNOISSEURS ACROSS THE NFL HAVE COME TO RECOGNIZE FOUR STAR RECEIVERS FOR THEIR UNIQUE ABILITY TO LEAVE DEFENSIVE BACKS IN THE DUST. THIS IS HOW DAVANTE ADAMS, JA'MARR CHASE, COOPER KUPP AND JUSTIN JEFFERSON DO IT

BY
CONOR ORR
AND
ALBERT
BREER

ILLUSTRATION BY
THE SPORTING PRESS

Have you ever watched a game and wondered why a defense can't prevent the ball from going to the one receiver everyone knows is getting it?

Is it reassuring to know that many coaches have wondered the same thing?

At this point, you surely know about the rule changes that have encouraged more passing and led to historic offensive output. You also have heard all about the forward-thinking passing concepts that are slowly (sometimes begrudgingly) absorbed from the lower levels of football, allowing rookie receivers to adjust to professional football faster than ever.

But what you might not have picked up on is precisely why the NFL's best pass catchers—and specifically, a certain quartet of them almost universally recognized by coaches and players as being a cut above the rest—get open on seemingly every play.

In the aughts, the position's stars were outsized behemoths with track-star speed—think Randy Moss and Calvin Johnson. And today's game still features some outliers in terms of physical traits. Miami's Tyreek Hill, for instance, is considered nothing special when it comes to the nuances of pure route running. His world-class speed and quickness allow him to either blow by opposing defensive backs or force them to play him with so much cushion that he feasts on quick throws.

But consider the four receivers hailed, by a cross section of coaches who spoke to SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, for their ability to get open under any circumstances. There's the Bengals' Ja'Marr Chase, the NFL's reigning Offensive Rookie of the Year, listed at six feet even, far from the domineering stature of the last generation's power-forward-on-the-gridiron trope. Cooper Kupp of the Rams captured pass-catching's triple crown last season (leading the NFL in receptions, receiving yards and TD catches) and is an elite athlete in many ways, but clocked in at a methodical 4.62 seconds in the 40-yard dash at the 2017 NFL combine—slower than, among others, five tight ends and two defensive linemen that year. Three years before that, Davante Adams, now of the Raiders, ran a forgettable 4.56 in the 40 and started his NFL career similarly slow before a third-year breakout in Green Bay. The fourth member of the route-running Mount Rushmore, Minnesota's Justin Jefferson, sizes up a little better (6' 1", 4.43 40 time at the NFL combine), but his measurables are less than mind-blowing.

It raises the question: How are *these* men simply unguardable?

Beyond physical gifts, the receiver position requires a kind of instantaneous brain response system more fitting for an astronaut or a poisonous-snake wrangler. Not to mention, a great receiver must be perpetually starving for his quarterback's approval, willing to rip a ball out of a defensive back's hands for a meager gain.

But they also must be eternally calm and quietly calculating when it comes to running routes. They must possess a transcendent understanding of the human psyche. They must be experts in close-quarter deception. They must harness and foster a flair for the dramatic. Like a good storyteller, they must choose when and why to reveal the secrets they've been keeping. They must lie. And they must be convincing.

Receivers are "in the business of always selling something that we're *not* doing or, at the very least, not giving any information away," says Brian Hartline, a longtime NFL receiver and current wide receivers coach at Ohio State, of the position's battles with opposing defensive backs. "Any information we do give away, we *want* [the opponent] to have. That's the art of running routes. They only do what we tell them to do, based on the information that we give them."

When it comes to Adams, Chase, Jefferson and Kupp, the broad reasons they're constantly getting open is because they're more deceiving. They are better storytellers. They are increasingly in tune with the psychology of defensive backs. Studying them, as almost any coach or competitive player at the collegiate level does now, reveals why today's NFL looks and feels the way it does.

Through interviews with NFL coaches and positional experts, we can better understand why four men, who measure up similarly to so many colleagues across the league, can make their current dominance look so effortless. In other words, we can reveal—at least some of—the secrets to their success.

THIS PAGE: JOHN W. MCDONOUGH; PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES; IAN JOHNSON/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; GARY A. VASQUEZ/USA TODAY SPORTS; DAVID E. KLUTHO

COOPER KUPP

Los Angeles Rams

THIS IS THE quandary facing any defender lined up across from Cooper Kupp in a play's first split second: Is he going to run a route, in which case I want to stick with him? Or is he going to try to block me, in which case I need to get away from him?

"He does all of the other things besides play wideout," says Zach Azzanni, the Broncos' wide receivers coach who is regarded as one of the league's top instructors at the position. "He blocks safeties, he pulls around through a hole and blocks the most dangerous linebacker. He's cutting off defensive ends. He's doing all those things that set up bootleg runs and naked [play-action] passes where it then looks like he's going to block an end, [but instead] just shaves the end and comes back out to get the ball and run for 15 yards.

"They play off each other. Half the catches he has are off the run game."

Kupp is much more than simply a player taking advantage of the fact that he's a two-way threat. There are receivers coaches who will describe Kupp's route-running ability the way instructors at a prima ballerina school might talk about Anna Pavlova. In that sense, he is an absolute perfectionist. He has his first step off the line of scrimmage analyzed by a team of researchers to ensure its effectiveness. Just watch him in Super Bowl LVI, squaring off against Cincinnati cornerback Eli Apple with the game on the line. A hard step inside, an arcing step outside and a backward, 90-degree spin in the air, Super Bowl–winning touchdown secured.

However, it is Kupp's effectiveness in the entirety of the team's offense that sets him apart. Contrast his final catch of last season with his first catch of the 2021 season, against the Bears. It started off as a blocking assignment. Facing Khalil Mack, one of the most feared pass rushers in football, Kupp threw his right shoulder into Mack's chest, holding him at the line long enough for quarterback Matthew Stafford to complete an elongated fake handoff.

This small gesture opens up a limitless number of possibilities for Rams coach Sean McVay, who can use Kupp as both a decoy and a weapon, sometimes simultaneously. If, on every snap, the defense cannot tell whether Kupp is blocking or running a route, its default position is one of hesitancy and confusion.

From there, almost like a boxer whose opponent is forced to keep their gloves away from their face for the first minute of every round, Kupp's precise movements carry an additional potency, turning an inch of open space into a mile.

LOS ANGELES RAMS
20 YDS
19YDS
Outlet

DAVANTE ADAMS

Las Vegas Raiders

“THE SAYING IN our room is, the best problem solvers are the best route runners.”

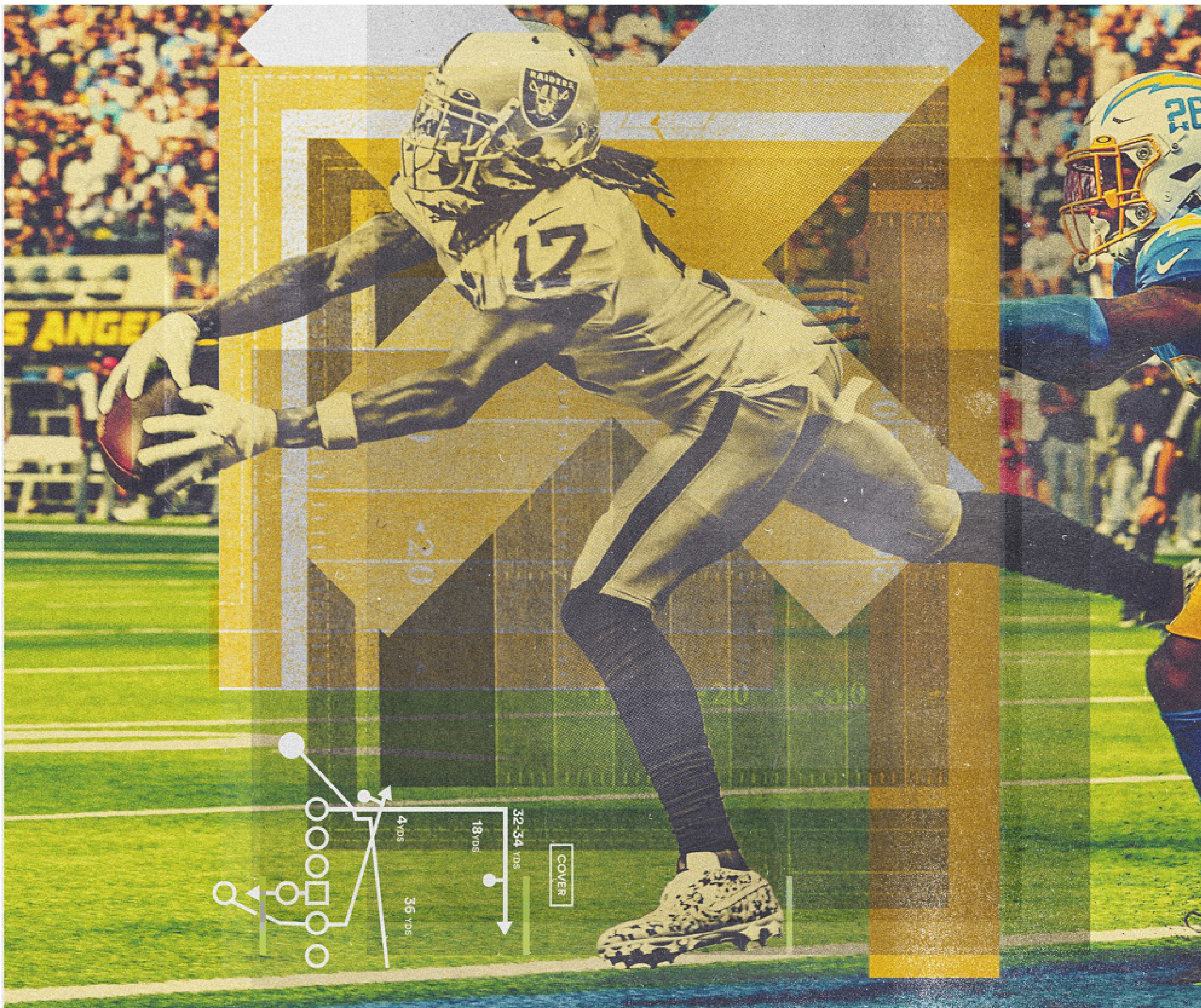
This is Brian Hartline’s way of introducing a video segment on Davante Adams, the one he was adamant his young players take in. It’s an interview with the Raiders receiver from *The Pivot Podcast* commenting on how he approaches the line of scrimmage on every snap. Every coordinator will admit that their defense has weak spots, and Adams has downloaded all the options on how to expose those gaps to his brain, where they’re available for immediate recall. For each coverage style the man across from him might be playing (press coverage, a two-yard cushion, a five-yard squat) Adams says he has “three ideas of what I’m going to do” based on his opponent’s technique.

In one example, Adams says he wants to get outside of the defensive back, meaning toward the sideline as opposed to the middle of the field. To do that, Adams may display all the characteristics and body language of a receiver wanting to gain inside leverage.

A receiver can stand before his defender for only a matter of seconds before the ball is snapped. In Adams’s mind, that’s more than enough time to put on a miniature one-man show of mental subterfuge. The repercussions can resonate throughout the rest of the game.

“At the end of the day, it’s about the presentation,” Adams says in the clip. “If you’re in front of me and

ROBERT GAUTHIER/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY IMAGES



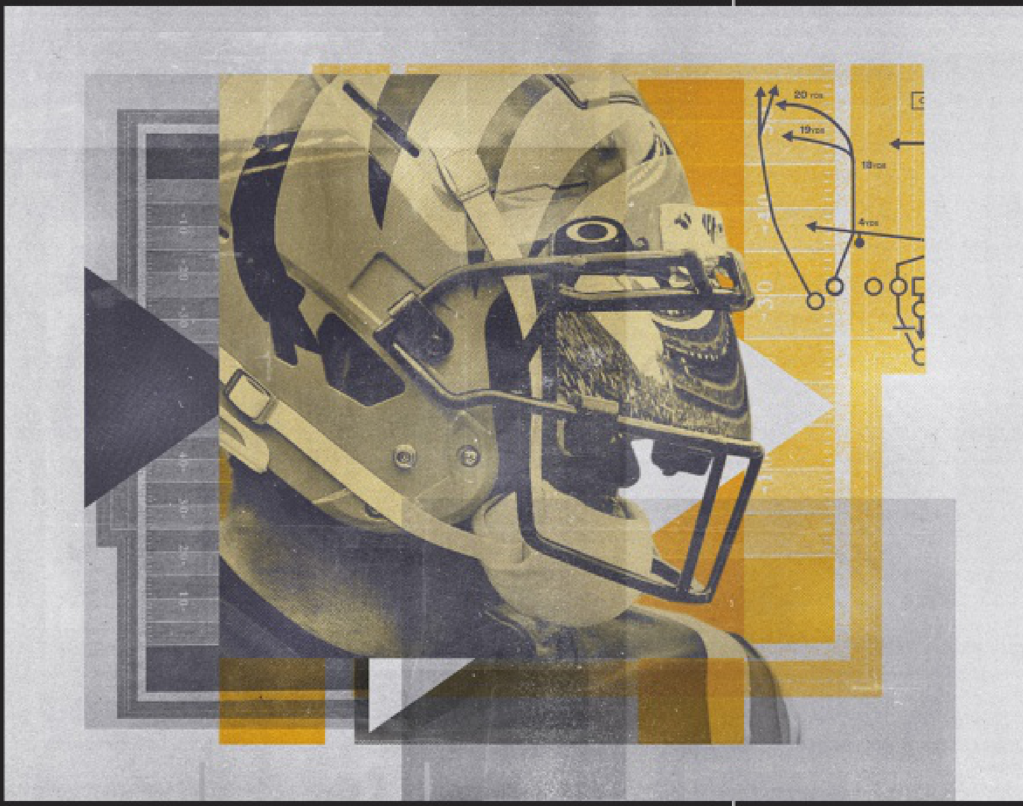
I make you feel like I really want to get inside, and I *show* you everything that looks like I'm getting inside, you've gotta respect that. And if you don't, I'm gonna go inside."

As a result, the available data to the opposing coaches and players trying to get a read on him is scrambled constantly, in real time.

That goes a long way in explaining how Adams has made five straight Pro Bowls and eclipsed 1,300 yards receiving in three of his last four seasons. It also explains why a lot of teaching tape in the league begins and ends with Adams, the best problem solver in the NFL.

"I've watched every single target Davante has had in his career," says Zach Azzanni. "He has this innate ability to understand leverage. Davante goes to the line of scrimmage, and however that corner or nickel is playing him . . . he already has it figured out based on the leverage. Some guys don't have that feel."

IAN JOHNSON/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES



JA'MARR CHASE

Cincinnati Bengals

DURING THE first quarter of Super Bowl LVI, Ja'Marr Chase, lined up wide and to the right, broke into a sprint toward Jalen Ramsey, the best cornerback in football. Something in Chase's gait or his eyes caused Ramsey to break down, expecting Chase to stop and cut to one side or the other. Instead, Chase threw his body into another gear, buzzing past Ramsey and immediately looking to the sky, where a ball that appeared just slightly out of his reach was already in the air. He fell to one knee, nesting it on his forearm.

Afterward, backed against a cacophony of cheers from a stunned crowd, color commentator Cris Collinsworth said, "He is one of the great finishers of catches I think I've ever seen." This would be like calling Louis Armstrong "one of the finest carriers of brass I've ever heard"; so much of that play happened before he touched the ball.

When talking to coaches in the wide receiver world, Chase is foremost praised for his body control. His steps are considered deliberate and, as one coach puts it, "powerful." And that restrained running style creates a natural level of deception against opponents trying to figure out not just where he's going, but also how fast he'll get there.

"You look and you're like, 'O.K., I'm looking at a 4.5 [40 time],' " says Brent Callaway, a speed and strength coach for Exos who worked with Chase before the 2021 draft. "Then you look down at the clock and you're like, 'My gosh, that's high-4.3.' That's not what it looks like. So you realize that there's a level of effortless that I'm sure people saw with Jerry Rice. Like, 'Oh, he's not a fast guy.' But you never saw anybody catch him. It's almost like he lulls you to sleep."

Watching Chase is a bit like watching a 400-meter dash. At the final turn a runner who had never drawn your eye is opening up a sizable lead with measured steps. He looks no faster than anyone else, and yet there he is, overtaking the pack down the home stretch.

And of course, the idea that he can not only make the fast part of a route look a little slower but also carry out the slow part of the route, the top end, with incredible quickness, is a nightmare for defensive backs.

Cincinnati coach Zac Taylor says Chase's raw skills are coupled with an obsessive work ethic. While the idea of staying after practice and working long hours with your position coach has transcended cliché in the NFL, Chase's drive to understand what makes him effective is yielding serious production.

"I've been around Cooper Kupp, and Cooper was extremely similar," says Taylor, a former Rams assistant who overlapped with Kupp in L.A. "We're just fortunate we have Ja'Marr. When your best players are your hardest workers, that really sets the tone for the team."

COVER
32-34 YDS
18YDS
Outlet
4YDS
36 YDS
-20

DAVID E. KLUTHO

JUSTIN JEFFERSON

Minnesota Vikings

THE WIDE ARRAY of routes you'll find in a typical NFL offense can, in some coaches' minds, be broken into two distinct categories: routes on which you run away and routes on which you break down. For example, on a post route, where a receiver runs straight and then makes an angular break toward the middle of the field, he's trying to pull away from a defender. On a curl route, where a receiver sprints straight ahead before hooking back toward the quarterback, his body is breaking down from top speed.

T.J. Houshmandzadeh, an 11-year NFL veteran and now one of the most sought-after position-specific experts in the personal training space, says that Justin Jefferson is the master of the runaway route. It all starts with three short steps.

As Houshmandzadeh explains: Imagine you're on the left side of the formation running a dig route, which starts out with the receiver selling a deep, vertical route before snapping back with a 90-degree cut to the middle. You want to cut to the right, so you step with your left foot, then step wide with your right foot and push off toward the left, feigning a move to the outside, then step with your left foot, pushing off back to the inside to make the cut.

The move is called a rocker step. "When you do that, it puts the defensive back on his heels and he gets into a kind of guessing situation, wondering which direction you're going to break," Houshmandzadeh says. He mentions two receivers who can pull it off at top speed: Cooper Kupp and Jefferson. "*Especially* Jefferson," Houshmandzadeh says. "Just go watch him. He doesn't lose speed when he makes that move."

Jefferson has plenty of other elite traits that set him apart, as well as a hunger to snatch the ball away from cornerbacks. Those contested catches, which can look like street fights, give him a combination of finesse and tenacity that has earned Jefferson, in just his third season, comparisons to a young A.J. Green.

"He puts it all together in a way where there's nothing from the standpoint of the route tree or concepts that you feel like he couldn't be a top-end player with," Vikings coach Kevin O'Connell says. "It's just the versatility of what he does." ☐

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERICK W. RASCO

FALLEN ANGEL

WHY DO MANAGERS GET CANNED? IN A NEW BOOK, A FORMER SKIPPER EXPLAINS HIS OWN FIRING THIS YEAR—AND THE FRONT-OFFICE CULTURE WAR RAGING ACROSS BASEBALL

BY JOE MADDON AND TOM VERDUCCI

BILLY MARTIN WAS fired nine times. The first time he was dismissed, in 1969 by the Twins, he was fired by appointment. One Sunday night shortly after the season, the brother of Minnesota president Calvin Griffith told Martin to expect a call from Griffith at precisely 10:30 the next morning. Martin deduced his boss was not arranging the call to extend his contract. He was correct.

Yogi Berra was fired by proxy in 1985. Yankees owner George Steinbrenner sent general manager Clyde King to fire Berra after a win in Chicago, just 16 games into a season in which Steinbrenner vowed Berra would manage the full year. So upset was Berra about being fired through an intermediary that he did not set foot in Yankee Stadium or speak to Steinbrenner for the next 14 years.

The Phillies fired Gene Mauch by telephone in 1965 after he had flown from Philadelphia to Los Angeles to attend to his wife, who was hospitalized with a stomach ailment. Asked when it dawned on him that he might be fired, Mauch snapped, "Eight years and two months ago." That's when Philadelphia had hired him.

Joe Maddon was fired in his living room, sporting a freshly cut mohawk. On the morning of June 7, 2022, the Angels had lost 12 games in a row in a cavalcade of oddities and disasters, including the worst two weeks of Mike Trout's baseball life (he hit .114 and struck out 17 times in those 12 games); a slump by Shohei Ohtani (.180, 15 strikeouts); injuries to key hitters Anthony Rendon and Taylor Ward; and epic failures by the bullpen. Los Angeles held 10 leads in those dozen games and lost them all.

Maddon had figured it was time to pull a page from an old playbook. On Sept. 15, 2008, the Red Sox had pummeled his Rays, 13–5, to create a virtual tie atop the American League East between the two teams. It was the first time in 52 days Tampa Bay did not hold the outright lead. The Rays were fading, and so was the amazing story of their rise from the worst record in baseball one year to the playoffs the next.

Maddon showed up at Tropicana Field the next day with a mohawk, a bold move if only because he and his fiancé, Jaye, were to be married the following month. Jaye had reminded him that wedding portraits last forever. Vanity be damned, Maddon figured the

haircut was a good way to loosen his team in the heat of the pennant race. Earlier that month, Rays center fielder B. J. Upton had sported a mohawk. The sight of their manager also rocking the 'do raised the silliness factor. Soon other players—and it seemed half the Rays' fans—had mohawks.

The night of the Maddon Mohawk, the Rays won 2–1. They won the next night, 10–3. And they won six of their next eight games to pull away from the Red Sox and win the division by two games.

In 2022, though, Maddon never made it to the ballpark with his mohawk. Angels GM Perry Minasian arrived at Maddon's front door and rang the bell. Maddon answered and invited him in. Minasian did not immediately notice the mohawk. If he did, he said nothing about it. He appeared uncomfortable.

Maddon thought he had a good idea of why Minasian was there. Over the previous few days Minasian had told Maddon he was considering firing some coaches. "You can't do that," Maddon had told him. "They're very good at what they do. No, that's not the answer."

Maddon took Minasian's appearance on his doorstep as a bad sign for his coaches. They sat down in the living room. Minasian made a quick comment about Maddon getting "a haircut." The words lacked the lilt of humor. Quickly it was apparent why. Minasian said he was "making a change" and removing him as manager. "I've got to do something, Joe," Minasian told him.

Says Maddon, "I did not overreact at all. I just said, 'O.K.' Quite frankly, I was happy he chose me and not the coaches. No one on that staff deserved to be fired.

"What was needed at that juncture was support . . . and not another version of the blame game. We all needed support from the bosses. That includes ownership. It would have been very easy for Arte Moreno to get on an airplane, walk through the clubhouse, talk to us, see what was going on, and I believe he would have come to a different conclusion."

Maddon and Moreno, the Angels' owner, had known one another for two decades. During spring training Joe and Jaye had hosted a party at their Arizona home for the entire staff and their spouses. Moreno and his wife, Carole, attended. Moreno did not speak to Maddon after the firing.

Maddon's firing had not been Moreno's idea, anyway. It was Minasian's. The GM spoke with Moreno just that morning and told the owner what he had in mind. "If this is what you decide is needed to right the ship, go ahead," Moreno told him, according to a team source familiar with the conversation. "It's totally your call."

The firing was not about Maddon losing the clubhouse; Minasian later said he did not consult with any players or coaches about the change. It was not about effort; Minasian said at his news conference later that day "the effort has been great." He did not give Maddon any specific reasons for why he was firing him. He kept telling him, "I've got to do something." Nor did Minasian provide specificity at his news conference.

Why, then, was Maddon fired? Before the losing streak, only the Yankees and Astros had won more games than the Angels in the American League. The team was improving under Maddon in his third year, just as it had in his second year, just as his teams did in his previous managing jobs with the Rays and Cubs. How could a World Series–winning manager with 19 years and 2,599 games of experience lose his job over a 12-game sample?

WAR OF IDEAS

Maddon sparred with Minasian (bottom left, with Maddon and Moreno) over bullpen usage and playing time for stars like Trout (right).

FROM TOP: TIM HEITMAN/GETTY IMAGES; KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS

The answer is that the firing had been in the works long before those dozen games, even if both men could not or did not want to see it that way. The losing streak simply provided an exit ramp for a relationship that was going nowhere—not because of any personal animosity but because of philosophical differences.

WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN Minasian and Maddon tells a familiar story of what has happened to the role of the manager—and baseball itself. The power shift from the dugout to the front office over more than a quarter of a century has changed how the game is played, and its value system. Knowledge over wisdom. Technology over teaching. Data over art. Efficiency over entertainment.

As front offices seized control, games grew longer, with less action, and there were more pitching changes, more fungibility of personnel and fewer fans. (Attendance has declined slowly but steadily since the all-time per-game high in 2007.) Meanwhile, baseball managers ceased being celebrities. It happened in part because the replay challenge system reduced colorful arguments with umpires, but mostly because managers operated with less power and job security than general managers. To survive, they adopted the bland corporate-speak of their bosses.

JOHN CORDES/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

The shift happened over the arc of Maddon's career in the major leagues. He was trying to hold on to the soul of baseball as he knew it, relying on trust, relationships and his coaches. Minasian was part of a generation of power brokers who dove even deeper into data and process. Depending on how you were raised in the game, a 68-year-old man in a mohawk was either a colorful master motivator or an unfunny gimmick that had no bearing on the win probability of the game that night.

If there was a physical space where this dynamic played out it was the coaches' room at Angel Stadium. Minasian and his top assistant, Alex Tamin, maintained lockers in the same room as the coaches, using the room as they changed between front-office attire and workout or game-day attire.

In the game in which Maddon was raised, GMs stayed out of the clubhouse unless they had specific business to attend there. The clubhouse and its immediate environs belonged to uniformed personnel. But Minasian and Tamin found it perfectly normal to share space with coaches on an everyday basis because it had become perfectly normal for executives to dictate game strategy as much as coaches. What Maddon regarded as interference Minasian regarded as standard operating procedure.

Maddon was also put off by some of the copycat processes implemented by Minasian. A certain intramural competition exists among baseball front offices, a kind of Silicon Valley cutting-edge war as to who can hire the smartest experts and install the latest technology, whether it's $15,000 whole-body-vibration "power plates" for training or $24,000 air and surface purifiers that convert ambient oxygen and humidity into dry hydrogen peroxide to reduce the presence of microbes. Last season the Giants plowed new ground by employing 13 coaches—one for every two players—including three hitting coaches and three pitching coaches. That number does not include their "breathing coach."

The Giants, Dodgers and Braves especially served as references for Minasian and his front office staff. In 2022 the GM instituted daily meetings with players, primarily the hitters, rather than just the traditional first-game-of-a-series meeting. "I just think it's way too over the top," Maddon says. "[Minasian] kept reminding me, 'The Braves did it. The Braves did it.' Fine. A lot of things were related to 'We did it this way with the Braves,' or 'This is how the Giants did it.' We were all over trying to do things like somebody else."

After last season, Minasian replaced Maddon's bench coach, Mike Gallego, with Ray Montgomery, a 52-year-old former player making the rare jump from the front office to the field. Montgomery, who had been the director of player personnel, was working in uniform for the first time after spending most of his career in scouting. Montgomery helped run those daily meetings.

Moreover, what Maddon calls a pregame "choreography" took root, spearheaded by Minasian and Tamin. Those two, not Maddon and his coaches, would decide which relief pitchers were not available for the game that night. It was based on a proprietary algorithm developed by Tamin that kept track of a pitcher's work in rolling 30-day increments. In recent years it had become common for front offices to usurp control of the bullpen from managers. So-and-so "is down tonight" entered baseball parlance, and it came from upstairs. "In that losing stretch that led to my demise, a lot of relievers were made unavailable," Maddon says. "I couldn't use them.

"Tam had the 30-day matrix built on how to use relief pitchers, how often and how much rest they needed. Honestly, that's insulting."

Maddon read body language, mechanics, clues in how his players answered his questions . . . all the insights gleaned from 42 seasons in professional baseball. The modern front office, however, has too much access to data to rely on the instincts of a veteran manager. Minasian and Tamin were not revolutionaries. They were deploying methodologies that had become mainstream. Says Maddon, "If you've grown up in an era of understanding the game and how important it is beyond the numbers to connect with people and establish patience and relationships with your players in order to have success, it's hard to get on the same page with front offices today.

"Other managers that I've spoken with, guys with experience, feel the same way, and they are encouraging me to speak up. This is not an attempt by me to 'get even' or anything like that. I'm not trying to protect myself. It's exposure. If you're a baseball fan, if you love the game and care about the game, you should know what is behind how the game is being played today."

THE DIVIDE BETWEEN old and new, manager and front office, data and art, Maddon and Minasian, reached a boiling point on May 9. The Angels had just scored five runs in the seventh inning against the Rays to turn a 6–3 lead into an 11–3 blowout. Ohtani hit a grand slam. The dugout was lively. Suddenly, head athletic trainer Mike Frostad walked up to Maddon at his usual perch on the top step of the dugout and said, "Perry just called down. He said get Trout out of the game."

Earlier in the day Trout had complained about a bit of soreness in his groin. But later he told Maddon that the soreness dissipated, and he was fine.

To Maddon, Minasian broke a sacred code. The GM had called the dugout during a game to dictate strategy to the manager—a proven, veteran manager at that. To Minasian, he simply was deploying the power given to this generation of executives. Nothing was sacred. Nothing was out of bounds.

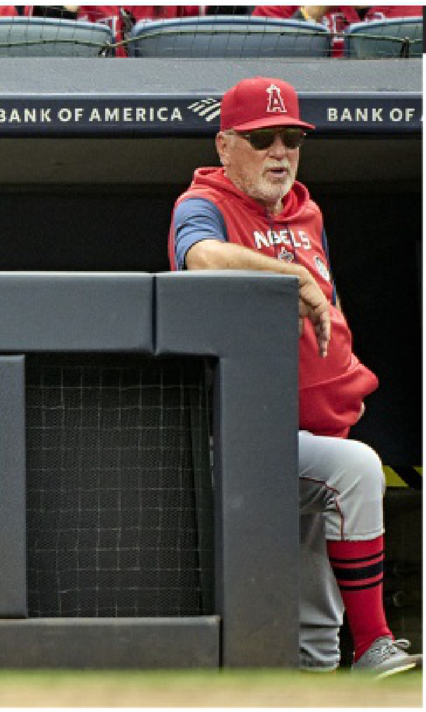
"IF YOU'RE A BASEBALL FAN, YOU SHOULD KNOW WHAT IS

The next day Maddon blew up at Minasian in Maddon's office. "Listen, don't you ever f------ call down to the dugout again!" Maddon said.

Twenty-six days later, he was gone. When Minasian fired him, Maddon offered him advice. He suggested that Minasian not bring Tamin on road trips. He did not tell Minasian to leave the coaches' room to the coaches. "I was going to text him the next day to bring it up, but I chose not to," Maddon says. "It was over."

Coaches and coaching are at the heart of Maddon's baseball belief system. To him they are to baseball what teachers are to education. Underpaid and underappreciated but indispensable. Keepers of the flame. “Who is teaching the next generation of coaches, and what are they teaching?” Maddon asks. “Is the game being taught or is it more reliant on studying feedback from technology? The players want to hear more and more about exit velocity and spin rates from coaches, as opposed to mechanical information that only a well-trained pitching coach or hitting coach could pass along.

IF YOU LOVE THE GAME AND CARE ABOUT THE GAME, BEHIND **HOW THE GAME IS BEING PLAYED TODAY.**”



CHANGING TIMES

Maddon hasn’t lost his love for the dugout and wants another job, but he doubts he’s still a fit for baseball’s data-driven culture.

ERICK W. RASCO

“Who is mentoring these groups? How is the game being passed on with the eradication of minor league teams? There is a lot of tearing of the fabric right now.”

At the top of today’s major league organizational chart is a triangle. The owner, lead baseball operations person (traditionally the GM, though title inflation has wrought fancier designations) and manager form the corners. But the triangle is inverted. The manager is at the bottom. The owner and general manager hold power over the manager, even as it relates to game strategy and coaching. The triangle works best only when all three positions buy in completely to the structure and philosophy.

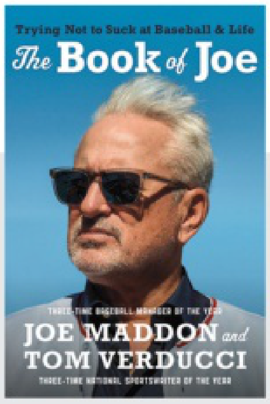
General managers increasingly prefer to hire managerial blank slates: candidates with little or no experience and thus no established philosophies or norms to clash with how they want the job done. In 32 managerial changes from the 2017–18 offseason through Maddon’s firing by the Angels, general managers picked a first-time manager on 19 occasions—almost 60% of the time.

The Angels’ inverted triangle lacked seamless philosophy and stability. Deep down, Minasian and Maddon knew this. Twelve straight losses forced Minasian to confront that reality. He replaced Maddon with Angels third-base coach Phil Nevin, another first-time MLB manager.

“The only reason you fire the manager,” Maddon says, “is there is a total disconnect between the manager and players, or there is a philosophical disconnect between the manager and either the GM or the owner I plead guilty to having philosophical differences with Perry. You don’t take it personally. It’s business.”

Maddon wants to manage again. But baseball has changed since he was a rookie manager with the 2006 Devil Rays. If Maddon has a place in the game again, it will be for someone else who also honors the soul of the game, who believes data enhances and complements art and instinct, not depreciates them.

“Right now as a manager, you need to understand you are going to be controlled,” Maddon says. “You’re really going to be required or asked to do exactly what the front office wants you to do. The trick then would be to somehow be able to build relationships—but even then, your ability to freely think, work and suggest with these players can be constricted. It’s just the way of the world right now.” □


Trying Not to Suck at Baseball & Life
The Book of Joe
THREE-TIME BASEBALL MANAGER OF THE YEAR
JOE MADDON and
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THREE-TIME NATIONAL SPORTSWRITER OF THE YEAR

Excerpted from THE BOOK OF JOE: Trying Not to Suck at Baseball & Life *by Joe Maddon and Tom Verducci.*

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Astro *in*

NEARLY ALL INVOLVED IN THE ASTROS' CHEATING SCANDAL HAVE APOLOGIZED AND BEEN WELCOMED BACK BY MLB. BUT NOT **JEFF LUHNOW**. *NOW RUNNING LOWER-LEVEL SOCCER TEAMS IN SPAIN AND MEXICO, THE FORMER GM—A POLARIZING FIGURE AT THE CENTER OF BASEBALL'S CULTURE WARS—SAYS HE DOESN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO PROVE TO ANYONE*

CDLEGANÉS
LaLiga

Exile

BY STEPHANIE APSTEIN

• • •

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
THOMAS LOVELOCK

BLUE CROW
BLUE CROW

As the best team in the American League races to a double-digit division lead, its architect sits in the owner's box of a half-full second-division Spanish soccer stadium on the outskirts of Madrid. It is the first match of his first season running CD Leganés. The owner of the opposing team, Deportivo Alavés, sits to his left, the mayor of Leganés to his right. The game is televised, but the broadcasters are calling it from a studio in Barcelona, 400 miles away.

Jeff Luhnow's Astros played in front of packed houses of 41,000 and drew close to a million people to celebrate their 2017 World Series title; on this night, Leganés plays before some 7,000 scattered faithful. In January, Blue Crow Sports Group, which Luhnow started, bought Cancún FC, a soccer team in the Mexican second division, for a reported $6.76 million; in June, it added Leganés for a reported $39 million. Luhnow is a hands-on owner, obsessing over everything from roster construction to player development to logo design, hoping to bring the kind of change to his second sport that he brought to his first.

To most, Luhnow appears to have taken a hard fall, even if he doesn't see it that way. At 55, he says he may return to baseball one day, "but right now I'm pretty busy." He says he has received "more than one" request to run an MLB team (he declines to be more specific) but turned them down.

Thirty-two months after being fired amid the Astros' cheating scandal, Luhnow is the last man in exile. Manager A.J. Hinch—who has admitted that he knew what his players were doing—was introduced as the Tigers' skipper some 72 hours after his suspension expired in October 2020. Bench coach Alex Cora—who helped direct the scheme—was rehired on a similar time line to manage the Red Sox. DH Carlos Beltrán—the only player named in the commissioner's report—now broadcasts games for the Yankees, one of the teams most incensed by the whole thing. But since Luhnow became eligible to return to MLB, seven clubs have fired their top baseball official, and none have hired the man who dragged the Astros from disaster to dynasty.

There are reasons for this. The others apologized. Luhnow still says he didn't do anything wrong. The others are baseball lifers. Luhnow is a businessman. He remains a divisive figure, brimming with contradictions.

BOB LEVEY/GETTY IMAGES (LUHNOW AND HINCH); TIM BRADBURY/GETTY IMAGES (CELEBRATION)

BLAST OFF

Luhnow (above, right) and Hinch led Houston to the 2017 World Series. The team has appeared in the ALCS every year since.

From the perspective of Luhnow's detractors, he was a cutthroat, cold-blooded McKinsey analyst who smugly sucked the soul out of the game. He got caught cheating, he was too arrogant to admit it, and he took his ball and traded it for another ball.

From Luhnow's perspective, he was an outsider who understood how to run a baseball team better than most of the people running baseball teams. He won't apologize because he has nothing to apologize for, and he is now working in soccer because he never really envisioned a career in baseball anyway.

Either one—or both—could explain how Luhnow got here, to Madrid, a continent away from the scandal. His eyes dart from the play on the field to the play his sponsors are getting on the ribbon boards. Luhnow has rarely discussed what happened in Houston, but as he watches one of his new teams, he is ready to share his views on his old one.

ON JAN. 13, 2020, Jeff and Gina Luhnow flew to Los Cabos, Mexico, to celebrate her 49th birthday. As the plane was landing, MLB commissioner Rob Manfred released a report of his investigation into a multiyear, multipronged cheating scheme by the Astros. While the Luhnows waited at baggage claim, Jeff's phone rang. Twenty-nine seconds later—he remembers precisely—he was unemployed.

MLB found that during Houston's 2017 World Series season, and part of '18, the Astros used an illegal monitor near the dugout to decipher opposing catchers' signs. Then a player would signal to Houston's batter what was coming by banging on a trash can. Simultaneously, video-room staffers ran a program called Codebreaker that decrypted signs, then passed their intel to the dugout so runners on second could signal batters.

Manfred wrote that he found no evidence Luhnow was aware of the trash-can plot or had ordered Codebreaker—but that he "failed to take any adequate steps" to ensure his club followed the rules. (The league accused Luhnow of erasing data from his phone before handing it over; Luhnow says he deleted only photos of his wife giving birth.) Manfred suspended him for the 2020 season.

Luhnow has maintained that he did not know anyone was cheating and that he would have stopped them if he had. In 2020, he sued the Astros for breach of contract in firing him for cause. The lawsuit also alleged that a video-room staffer had texted colleagues, "Don't tell Jeff," about the scheme. (Luhnow declined to share the text.) The suit was dismissed the next year at the request of both Luhnow and the Astros, suggesting a settlement had been reached. Both sides declined to comment on the matter.

Luhnow seems to see the sign-stealing scandal as a black swan event: shocking, earth-shaking and impossible to have foreseen because he wasn't involved in it.

Does he believe the scandal tarnishes the 2017 title? "I think that the Astros built a powerhouse," he says. "And it's unfortunate for our fans that going through '17 and winning that World Series and then two years later having to have people question that—it's unfortunate, and I wish that had never happened.

"And I will never be one to say that the rule-breaking helped or didn't help on the field because I don't know. I don't think there's anybody that really knows the true answer to that. It wasn't right. It shouldn't have happened. When you break the rules, you break the rules, and you have to suffer the consequences of that. It's the wrong thing to do. But how much it actually impacted the results, I have no idea. Could it have? . . . In some people's minds, it absolutely did, and you're never going to convince them otherwise. So unfortunately, it puts some doubt. . . . It's unfortunate for our fans, more than anybody else, that they have to [face] that question."

But does it tarnish the title?

"I think it tarnishes it for a lot of people, yeah."

"HOW MUCH IT ACTUALLY IMPACTED THE RESULTS, I HAVE NO IDEA," LUHNOW SAYS OF THE ASTROS' CHEATING. "UNFORTUNATELY, IT PUTS SOME DOUBT."

LUHNOW WAS RUTHLESS in his pursuit of any advantage for the Astros, but he says he "figured we all know the rules and we're all gonna follow the rules." Never mind that in September 2017, after a Red Sox trainer was caught in the dugout using an Apple Watch to relay decoded signs, Manfred issued a memo to all 30 teams reminding them of the rules about electronics and sign-stealing, adding that GMs and managers would be held accountable for violations. Or that in '18, Luhnow's Astros accused at least two other teams of stealing signs illegally. Or that ballplayers, in general, have been cheating since Frank Corridon first spat on his fingers at the turn of the century.

Luhnow says he regrets not having a compliance department in Houston, so he has added one at Leganés and Cancún. Would reminders from a compliance department have stopped the Astros from cheating? Baseball history says no. Luhnow says yes.

This kind of argument—preposterous to those inside the game, logical to Luhnow—has defined his career.

HEADY DAYS

Last year Leganés (right, in white, against Eibar) finished near .500 in Spain's second division. Luhnow (above) sees potential.

He was an engineer turned management consultant turned entrepreneur with no baseball experience—until an old McKinsey colleague mentioned that his father-in-law, Cardinals owner Bill DeWitt, was looking to add a *Moneyball* mindset to his club.

Luhnow arrived in St. Louis in 2003 as a vice president and immediately made enemies. Sometimes the pushback he faced bordered on absurd. His detractors called him "the accountant" and "Harry Potter." Some longtime Cardinals employees pointedly ignored him in the hallways. On the day one person was fired, upper management moved Luhnow to a different office for fear the spurned man would come looking for him.

But when Luhnow respected someone, he gave that person autonomy. "My way of doing things is to hire very good people and let them do their jobs," he says.

Luhnow valued both human input and data. Along with analyst Sig Mejdal, he created a model called STOUT: half stats, half scouts. The Cardinals engineered MLB's most successful draft of this century, in 2009, when St. Louis nabbed five players who would star for the '13 NL champs, including Matt Carpenter.

When Astros owner Jim Crane offered Luhnow the GM's job in 2011, Crane famously handed him a blank piece of paper: There would be no parameters. Luhnow took the 30th-ranked baseball team and the 30th-ranked farm system, and he began an unpopular tear-down-and-rebuild process. As Houston tanked to an astounding 310 losses in Luhnow's first three seasons, his peers in the industry mocked him. Fans revolted. At times the listless club earned a 0.0 Nielsen rating.

"If you are a person that wants to innovate and create positive change, you're gonna get resistance," Luhnow says of those early Astros years. "If the idea that you're trying to work on was obvious and accepted by everybody, it would already be in place."

Along the way, the team stockpiled young talent and revolutionized player development, pioneering the use of high-speed video to improve prospects. In 2017 the Astros won the first World Series in team history. They have played in every AL Championship Series since then and the World Series twice more. When *The Athletic* ultimately reported in November '19 that Houston had illegally stolen signs, Luhnow says he was blindsided.

His wife, at least, believes him. Gina deploys a handful of supporting anecdotes: the time he spotted an iPad in the Astros' dugout on TV and immediately got word to the clubhouse to have it removed; the time he read about Boston's Apple Watch infraction and called Hinch to confirm their team wasn't doing anything similar; or the time Gina asked her husband why he was sure that nothing illicit was going on and Jeff confidently replied, "We're too good. We don't have to cheat."

Half a dozen people who have worked closely with Luhnow agree with his assessment of his own management style. Hiring people and trusting them is a good way to run an organization when everyone performs well. It is also a convenient way to create plausible deniability for the leader when they get caught cheating.

LUHNOW RAN THE Astros like a corporation. Many employees wore ties. People gently—or not so gently—ribbed one another for taking vacation. The baseball operations department prided itself on being more effective than other teams', with fewer resources. If someone wanted to spend a few days at a minor league affiliate, they had to justify the cost.

In 2017 and ’18, Luhnow brought in his old coworkers at McKinsey, prompting a backlash from baseball people. “[It was] like, ‘What the hell are these people doing?’ ” says one former Astros employee. “ ‘Standing in the hallway, and every time I walk by they write in their f---ing notebook?’ ”

When you’re brought in to create change, Luhnow liked to say, roughly a third of the people in place when you arrive will flourish. A third must be removed immediately. And the last third will be weeded out over time. Indeed, of the 26 people in the Astros’ baseball ops department who were in place for Luhnow’s first year, 18 were gone by his last: a turnover rate of 69%.

This all might sound like an uncomfortable workplace environment, and sometimes it was. But most of the people who stuck around came to believe in the strategy. Luhnow earned his reputation as a cold-hearted consultant, but he is personable and quick to poke fun at himself. Even the former employees who offer critiques all mention how much they liked working for Luhnow. Yet he is so unpopular in bigger baseball circles that people who rave about him privately are reluctant to do so publicly.

Luhnow recognizes he is radioactive. At one point he offers a list of references—people who know him well—but acknowledges they might not be comfortable speaking publicly on his behalf.

“Don’t put my name on it, but he’s one of the smartest people I’ve ever been around,” says one person.

Adds another: “It’s sad to me that he’s a public enemy and a villain when I know him to be just a complicated person that’s made some mistakes and also done some great things.”

Even Luhnow’s supporters agree that he brought some of the scandal fallout upon himself. He drew ire from his peers in other organizations by smugly flouting convention. He slashed departments, creating a slew of disgruntled former employees. He antagonized journalists who questioned him, while playing nice with anyone who wrote glowingly about him. As the Astros began to win, staffers gleefully reviewed the lists of people who hadn’t believed in them. “F--- those guys,” they cried, not particularly quietly.

“I think we were the most disliked organization before [the sign-stealing] came out,” says one person who worked for the team.

Luhnow believes that was the cost of trying to shake up such a tradition-bound industry. “That’s unfortunately the curse of being an innovator,” he says. His adamance that he knew nothing of the sign-stealing only brought more scorn.

“The unapologetic *I didn’t do anything wrong* part is why he’s polarizing,” says one of the people who worked with him. As the boss, he adds, you have to take the heat. “Aren’t you responsible for it all anyway?”

LUHNOW HAD CLIMBED out of his gray rental Ford sedan in the stadium parking lot 90 minutes before kickoff, and within seconds a grade schooler was asking for a photo. Luhnow obliged. Before he ran off, though, the boy begged the owner to sign a striker.

Luhnow laughed. With two weeks left in the two-month transfer window, this is all he hears, every time he picks up his phone or reads a newspaper or walks through the stadium. Luhnow was born and raised in Mexico City, and he speaks Spanish at a native level, but just in case, fans have begun posting the definition of fichaje, or signing, underneath each of his tweets.

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FOREIGN EXCHANGE

Luhnow, who helped develop stars like Alex Bregman (right) in Houston, hopes to work the same magic in Leganés.

If Luhnow misses baseball, he doesn’t show it. He was never really romantic about the national pastime. He saw the right set of circumstances for him to create change. Now he sees that in soccer.

“That’s part of the challenge that excites me,” he says. “Being in an industry where there’s a lot of skepticism around the use of technologies, analytics and data, trying to do what we did in baseball, which is demonstrate through wins that this stuff works.”

In some ways, he faces a more formidable challenge than the one he took on in Houston. Leganés is not as barren as the Astros were, but Luhnow cannot tear the club all the way down without risking relegation, which would cost him most of his financial investment. Besides, there is no draft here to hoard top picks in. He has to find a new way to win, in a new sport that he admits he doesn't fully understand.

On this night, Alavés scores first. When Leganés answers, in the 68th minute, Luhnow allows himself to jab the mayor in the ribs, in celebration. Six minutes later, Alavés retakes the lead. But then, with seconds left, a Leganés forward is fouled and earns a free kick just across midfield. He sails the ball toward the left side of the goal, where one teammate heads it back across the middle to another streaking forward who deposits it with a right-foot touch. Luhnow is poking the mayor again when he realizes that no one else seems as happy as he is. The goal has been disallowed. Leganés loses.

State Farm
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ERICK W. RASCO

"Why'd they call it off?" Luhnow asks Alfredo Garzón, the lawyer who brokered the sale of the team, as he walks back to his office.

"It was offside," Garzón explains.

Luhnow says he does not mind not being an expert in soccer, because even after 16 years in major league ballparks, he never considered himself an expert in baseball. His expertise, he says, lies in identifying talent and helping craft a strategy. He declines to be any more specific about his plans for Leganés. "You can't disclose what those are," he adds, smiling, "because then your competition might copy them."

Even before the Astros fired him, Luhnow says, he was exploring changing fields; he felt he had learned all he could in the sport. "It was very opportunistic that I ended up in baseball," he says. "It could have been football, could have been basketball. I love baseball—it's always been one of my favorite sports. But I'm a *sports* fan; I'm a technology person; I'm a business person."

Luhnow has designs on something of a global empire. In 2021 he and a group of partners formed SportsTek Acquisitions Corporation and took it public. Luhnow is also the CEO of Blue Crow Sports Group, which owns majority shares in the two soccer teams, and in Blue Crow Analytics, which works with teams and players across sports.

As for the soccer clubs, he chose those carefully: Cancún, a resort destination, offers many potential paying customers, and of the 39 soccer cities in North America, 33 have multiple daily direct flights there. As for Leganés, he liked its century of history, its proximity to Madrid and its stable financial situation.

Luhnow says most of his investors told him they were giving him money not because they were looking to invest in soccer but because they were looking to invest in him. He expects both teams to rise to the first division—Leganés was there as recently as 2020—though he declines to share a time line.

Most people who did not want their names in this story also say that they think Luhnow will succeed. One former coworker says, "Ten years from now, when we're all playing *FIFA 33*, [his is] the team we'll all want to be."

LUHNOW KNOWS THERE is no way to prove he *didn't* know. But if the lingering suspicion bothers him, he does not say so. He says he is not concerned about his legacy—but anyway, he thinks people see the Astros mostly as winners: "Anything negative with the organization, it's not the predominant part [of the conversation]," he says. Pressed on this—watch the Astros play at Yankee Stadium and it sure seems predominant—he shrugs. "I just don't see it that way," he says.

Gina wanted him to stay in U.S. sports, to win again there. But Jeff says, "I'm not looking to prove anything to anybody."

Still, within 24 hours of his firing, Luhnow was glaring at his laptop screen, typing furiously. Over the next two or three months—as internet sleuths combed through video for signs of cheating; as fans bought Houston Asterisks gear; as Luhnow's former players took retaliatory fastballs to the ribs—"he just sat and wrote all day long," Gina says. "That's all he did."

"I was kind of like, 'People don't really know *this*. . . . All they write about is *this*,' " Luhnow says. He says when he finished, he had a 750-page manuscript of a memoir. He might try to publish it one day, he says, but he's in no rush. In the meantime, everyone else can think what they want. □

POINT AFTER

CLASS EXIT

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Roger Federer's retirement announcement was a somewhat subdued affair: an elegant four-page letter dropped on Instagram in mid-September. (Well, as subdued as a post with more than three million likes can be.) Federer, 41, leaves with an airtight case as the GOAT of men's tennis—20 Grand Slam titles, 310 weeks ranked world No. 1 and perhaps the purest, most varied shotmaking the game has ever seen. Even more distinct are the grace and humility he displayed on and off the court. Wimbledon still quaintly refers to its men's bracket as the "gentlemen's" draw, but when Federer played there the term rang true. Fitting, then, that he won more men's singles titles there (eight) than anyone else.

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